

# Never Again? Jewish action in solidarity with the Uyghurs in China

René Cassin Briefing – January 2020



It is estimated that close to two million Muslim Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities are being detained indefinitely in ‘re-education’ camps in China’s western Xinjiang Region, where they are forced to deny their religion and culture as ‘backwards and dangerous. The Chinese government denies the claims, saying people willingly attend special ‘vocational schools’, which combat “terrorism and religious extremism”.’

The range of people detained in the camps, from elderly women, to intellectuals, and celebrated artists, are being detained as part of a wider effort by the Chinese government to subdue and erase Uyghur culture.

## Who are the Uyghurs?

The Uyghurs are Turkic-speaking Muslims from the Central Asian region. The largest population live in China’s autonomous Xinjiang region, in the country’s north-west, and they are different to China’s Han majority. The Uyghurs are one of a number of persecuted Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, including the Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz and Hui. Many Uyghurs practise Islam, and do not speak Mandarin as a first language.

## The background to human rights abuses in Xinjiang

Since 1949 the Uyghur homeland has been a part of the People’s Republic of China. Decades of Han migration and discriminatory policies towards Uyghur people have led to tensions and sporadic violence.

After escalating tensions in 2009, the Chinese government began to take measures to curb the freedoms of the Uyghur people. In 2014, the Chinese government commenced the “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” (“Strike Hard”). The aim was ostensibly to tighten security, but in reality apparently justified further restrictions on freedom of religion, with oppression tactics growing in severity to an even greater extent after a change in Xinjiang leadership in 2016.<sup>1</sup>

Under the guise of security, the Chinese government has labelled the entire Uyghur community “as a terrorist collective” and any behaviour that could disagree with the Communist Party line or traditional Han Chinese ways of life is seen as dangerous.<sup>2</sup>

According to a *Human Rights Watch* report, officials “insist that... [non-Han Chinese] beliefs and affinities must be ‘corrected’ or ‘eradicated’”, going as far as to “effectively [outlaw] Islam” in Xinjiang.<sup>3</sup> Such religious oppression should be concerning from anyone who values the freedom of religion and to worship.

## The current situation

In recent years, there have been reports of so-called “re-education” camps in Xinjiang<sup>4</sup>, and Uyghur people disappearing. The camps have been compared to “wartime concentration camps”<sup>5</sup>, although the Chinese government has called them “re-education” camps or “boarding schools”.<sup>6</sup>

A series of maps released in November 2019 show suspected 500 labour camps, “re-education” camps, and prisons in Xinjiang.

<sup>1</sup> “Eradicating Ideological Viruses”: China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims’ (*Human Rights Watch*, 9 September 2018) <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>> accessed 9 September 2019

<sup>2</sup> Hayes (n 3)

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch (n 6)

<sup>4</sup> Peter Stubbley, ‘Uighur Muslims forbidden to pray or grow beards in China’s ‘re-education’ camps, former detainee reveals’ (*The Independent*, 22 March 2019)

<<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-uighur-muslim-education-camps-forbidden-beards-pray-pork-xinjiang-a8835861.html>> accessed 6 September 2019

<sup>5</sup> Peter Stubbley, ‘Muslim women “sterilised” in China detention camps, say former detainees’ (*The Independent*, 12 August 2019) <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/uighur-muslim-china-sterilisation-women-internment-camps-xinjiang-a9054641.html>> accessed 6 September 2019

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

It is estimated that between one and two million Uyghurs have been incarcerated in these camps, where they “are reportedly subject to forced political indoctrination and religious oppression”.<sup>7</sup> Inmates cannot contact their family members beyond prescribed contact according to what is dictated to them owing to the strong fear of being monitored.

Those who attempt to contact the outside world, whether from within a camp or just from within China, face serious threats to their liberty and even life. The Strike Hard campaign and its associated mass surveillance are such that “foreign ties [are] a punishable offence”, so that Uyghurs, even if they live somewhat freely outside of the camps, cannot contact family or friends abroad out of fear of the dangerous consequences.<sup>8</sup>

Across the Xinjian region, as in the camps themselves, the Muslim Uyghurs cannot pray, cannot grow beards, and are coerced into eating pork, particularly on Fridays, at a time traditionally reserved for praying.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese government is not only prohibiting worship of their religious belief and is attempting to “re-educate” the beliefs out of them, but is also forcing the Uyghurs to directly contravene what their beliefs dictate.

Entire families are being destroyed and separated. For example, under the guise of “centralised care”, Muslim children have been removed from their families, and sent to “boarding schools”, in efforts to create a distance between them and their roots. The aim being mainly ethnic and religious. Many children have both of their parents in camps. Those in “boarding schools” are reported to be dressed in unwashed, thin clothes, even during harsh winter weather.<sup>10</sup> Women in camps are being sterilised without their consent by being given injections, the purposes of which they are not told, which stop menstruation and have caused mental illness.<sup>11</sup> The situation in Xinjiang extends beyond simple restrictions on freedom of religion into the realm of “social re-engineering and cultural genocide”.<sup>12</sup>

In November 2019, an internal security memo from the Chinese Communist authorities to the officials running the camps was leaked to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists<sup>13</sup>. In a subsequent BBC *Panorama*<sup>14</sup> interview, Nury Turkel of the Uyghur Human Rights Project, said of the memo “It looks like a Nazi playbook to me”, and leading UK human rights expert Ben Emmerson QC said “It’s designed to wipe the Uyghurs as a separate cultural group, off the face of the earth.”

## About René Cassin

René Cassin, the Jewish Voice for Human Rights, works to promote and protect universal human rights for the rights of other minorities on issues that resonate with Jewish values and Jewish experience and advocating for the rights of other minorities. In May 2019 we hosted a public meeting to raise awareness of the plight of China’s Uyghurs. In October, in a document sub-titled ‘Xianjiang – “never again” is happening again’<sup>15</sup>, René Cassin submitted detailed evidence of China’s repression of Uyghurs to Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Select Committee, and made urgent recommendations for action at a diplomatic level.

The Jewish experience of religious (and ethnic) persecution shows us the importance of being able to both hold our beliefs and express them freely, a rights that was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the “never again” phrase that came out of the atrocities of the Second World War has not applied, and history has concerning predictions for what will happen in Xinjiang, if it has not already taken.

For more information: <https://www.renecassin.org/jewish-action-against-persecution-of-uyghurs/>

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<sup>7</sup> Yasmin Qureshi and Alistair Carmichael, ‘MPs can no longer hide from the mass incarceration of Uighur Muslims in China’ (*New Statesman*, 26 July 2019) <<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2019/07/mps-can-no-longer-hide-mass-incarceration-uyghur-muslims-china>> accessed 6 September 2019

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch (n 6)

<sup>9</sup> Stubble (n 11)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Stubble (n 12)

<sup>12</sup> Zenz (n 20)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/read-the-china-cables-documents/> accessed 28 January 2020

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000bt17/panorama-how-to-brainwash-a-million-people>, accessed 28 January 2020

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.renecassin.org/xinjiang-never-again-is-happening-again/> accessed 28 January 2020