



Uyghurs in China

Uyghurs (also spelled “Uighurs”) are an ethnic group living primarily in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC’s) far northwest. Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and practice a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The XUAR, often referred to simply as Xinjiang (pronounced “SHIN-jyahng”), is a provincial-level administrative region which comprises about one-sixth of China’s total land area and borders eight countries. The region is rich in minerals, produces over 80% of China’s cotton, and has China’s largest coal and natural gas reserves and a fifth of its oil reserves. The XUAR is a strategic region for the PRC’s Belt and Road Initiative, which includes Chinese-backed infrastructure projects and energy development in neighboring Central and South Asia.



Sources: CRS using U.S. Department of State Boundaries; Esri; Global Administrative Areas; DeLorme; NGA.

All or parts of the area comprising Xinjiang have been under the political control or influence of Chinese, Mongols, and Russians for long spans of the region’s documented history, along with periods of Turkic or Uyghur rule. Uyghurs played a role in the establishment of two short-lived East Turkestan Republics in the 1930s and 1940s. The PRC asserted control over Xinjiang in 1949 and established the XUAR in 1955. Uyghurs once were the predominant ethnic group in the XUAR; they now constitute roughly 45% of the region’s population of 24 million, or around 10.5 million. The government long has provided economic incentives for Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group in China, to migrate to the region; Hans now constitute about 40% of the XUAR population.

Human Rights Issues

Since an outbreak of Uyghur demonstrations and ethnic unrest in 2009, and sporadic clashes involving Uyghurs and Xinjiang security personnel that spiked between 2013 and 2015, PRC leaders have sought to “stabilize” the XUAR through more intensive security measures aimed at combatting “terrorism, separatism and religious extremism.” PRC official data indicates that criminal arrests

in Xinjiang increased from approximately 14,000 in 2013 to 228,000 in 2017.

Since 2017, in tandem with a new national policy referred to as “Sinicization,” XUAR authorities have instituted measures to assimilate Uyghurs into Han Chinese society and reduce the influences of Uyghur, Islamic, and Arabic cultures and languages. The XUAR government enacted a law in 2017 that prohibits “expressions of extremification” and placed restrictions, often imposed arbitrarily, upon dress and grooming, practices of traditional Uyghur customs, and adherence to Islamic dietary laws (halal). Thousands of mosques in Xinjiang reportedly have been demolished or “Sinicized,” whereby Islamic motifs and Arabic writings have been removed. There have been reports of a government campaign to forcefully reduce birth rates among Turkic Muslims in the region.

Beginning in 2016, Chen Quanguo, the newly appointed Communist Party Secretary of the XUAR, stepped up security and surveillance measures aimed at the Uyghur population. Such actions included the installation of thousands of neighborhood police kiosks, more intrusive monitoring of Internet use, and the collection of biometric data for identification purposes. The central government sent an estimated one million officials and state workers from outside Xinjiang, mostly ethnic Han, to live temporarily in Uyghur homes to assess their compliance with government policies.

Mass Internment

By some estimates, between 2017 and 2020, Xinjiang authorities have arbitrarily detained an estimated 1.5 million Turkic Muslims, mostly Uyghurs and a smaller number of ethnic Kazakhs, in “reeducation camps.” The facilities also have held many prominent Uyghur intellectuals. PRC officials describe the facilities as “vocational education and training centers” where “trainees” study Chinese, learn job skills, and undergo a process of “de-extremization.” Detainees, some of whom may have engaged in religious or ethnic cultural practices that the government previously tolerated but now deems as extremist, reportedly are compelled to renounce many of their Islamic beliefs and customs as a condition for their release.

In the second half of 2019, PRC officials claimed that most detainees had been released, although many Uyghurs living abroad say that they still have not heard from missing relatives in Xinjiang. According to some reports, many detainees likely have been formally convicted of crimes and placed in higher security facilities. Some reeducation centers appear to have been decommissioned, while dozens of new or repurposed facilities resembling prisons have sprung up in the past year. The government reportedly has

relocated other former detainees and their families to special residential compounds and restricted travel in and out.

Forced and Involuntary Labor

According to some reports, the PRC government has begun to move large numbers of Uyghurs, including many former detainees, into textile, apparel, and other labor-intensive industries in Xinjiang and other PRC provinces. Uyghurs who refuse to accept such employment may be threatened with detention or criminal charges. In addition, former detainees are required to attend political study classes following their work shifts. In March 2020, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China released a report, “Global Supply Chains, Forced Labor, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.” A report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute identified nearly 120 Chinese and foreign companies that the institute alleges directly or indirectly benefit from Uyghur labor in potentially abusive circumstances.

Selected U.S. Responses

Import Restrictions. Beginning in October 2019, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has issued a series of announcements blocking the import of certain goods suspected of involving Xinjiang-related forced labor. The actions, taken pursuant to the forced labor import ban under Section 307 of the Tariff Act of 1930, have targeted apparel, hair products, cotton, and computer parts produced by specific Chinese companies, as well as products produced by a purported reeducation center in Xinjiang.

The pending Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (S. 3471 and H.R. 6210) would, among other provisions, create a presumption of denial of import into the United States of items produced, wholly or in part, in Xinjiang or by certain Xinjiang-related entities pursuant to Section 307. H.R. 6210 passed in the House on September 22, 2020. The pending Uyghur Forced Labor Disclosure Act of 2020 (H.R. 6270), which would amend the Securities Exchange Act of 1934 to require issuers of securities to make certain disclosures related to the import of goods from Xinjiang, passed in the House on September 30, 2020.

Export Controls. Since October 2019, the U.S. Department of Commerce has added a total of 48 PRC companies and public security entities to the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) “entity list” under the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) for their connection to PRC human rights abuses in Xinjiang. The actions impose licensing requirements prior to the sale or transfer of certain U.S. items to these entities, with a presumption of license denial for most items.

Legislation. On June 17, 2020, President Trump signed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 (P.L. 116-145) into law. The act aims to impose visa and economic sanctions on PRC officials determined to be responsible for human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. The act also mandates the Department of State, the Director of National Intelligence, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, respectively, to submit reports to the relevant Congressional committees on

the following: human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including detention and forced labor; the security and economic implications posed to the United States by PRC policies in Xinjiang, including a list of Chinese companies involved in constructing or operating internment camps or providing mass surveillance equipment; and U.S. efforts to protect Uyghur-Americans and ethnic Uyghurs from China legally residing in the United States from harassment or intimidation by officials or agents of the PRC government.

Sanctions. In July 2020, the Trump Administration designated six current or former Communist Party officials in Xinjiang, including XUAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo (a member of the Chinese Communist Party Politburo), for sanctions pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13818. E.O. 13818 implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act (Title XII, Subtitle F of P.L. 114-328), which authorizes the President to impose both economic sanctions and visa denials or revocations against foreign individuals or entities responsible for human rights abuses or corruption. Also designated under E.O. 13818 were the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, a paramilitary organization with major economic interests in the XUAR.

Also in July 2020, the State Department additionally announced visa restrictions against PRC officials and their immediate family members pursuant to Section 7031(c) of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Act, 2020 (Division G of P.L. 116-94). The State Department also indicated that it was imposing human rights-related entry denials pursuant to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) on unspecified PRC officials and, separately, on unspecified employees of Chinese technology companies. The department had previously announced INA restrictions against unspecified PRC officials in October 2019.

Alleged Terrorism

The PRC government has attributed some past deadly incidents in the XUAR to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which it portrays as a Uyghur separatist and terrorist group with ties to global terrorist organizations. The U.S. government designated ETIM as a terrorist organization under Executive Order 13224 in 2002 (to block terrorist financing) and placed ETIM on the Terrorist Exclusion List in 2004. ETIM is not on the Department of State’s narrower “Foreign Terrorist Organization” (FTO) list. At its height, ETIM, whose members reportedly spent time in Afghanistan and Pakistan from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s, was a small, loosely organized and poorly financed group that lacked weapons and had little if any contact with global jihadist groups, according to some experts. The U.S. government “identified sufficient evidence” to consider three violent incidents in China purportedly involving Uyghurs as terrorist attacks in 2014. According to the Department of State, the lack of available information has made it difficult to verify most other PRC accounts of alleged terrorist activity.

Thomas Lum, Specialist in Asian Affairs

Michael A. Weber, Analyst in Foreign Affairs

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