



# The situation of the Uyghur people in China

General Assembly 1



Shattered Vows: Tracing the Devastation Caused by  
Violating Human Rights



**Forum:** General Assembly 1

**Issue:** The situation of the Uyghur people in China

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## Introduction

In the vast landscape of human rights violations in the 21st century, one of the most pressing and shocking issues of our time unfolds in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China. The Uyghur people, a mostly Muslim ethnic minority, find themselves at the centre of an alarming human rights crisis that has garnered international attention and condemnation. As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, the situation of the Uyghur population demands urgent discussion, challenging the principles of justice, equality, and human dignity on a global scale.

China's Xinjiang region has become a focal point for concerns about the Chinese government's treatment of the Uyghur people. Reports of mass detentions, forced labour, cultural assimilation campaigns, and pervasive surveillance have cast a shadow over the fundamental rights and freedoms of this historically marginalised community. The alleged abuses have raised profound ethical questions about the limits of state power, the protection of minority rights, and the responsibility of the international community to address violations occurring within the borders of a sovereign nation.

By reading this research report it becomes evident that the protection of human rights is not only a moral imperative but a collective responsibility that transcends borders and ideologies. We hope that every country finds itself responsible for the help of the Uyghur people and come up with a solution.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Uyghurs

The Uyghurs are an ethnic group who originate from the general region of Central and East Asia.<sup>1</sup> They are Turkic, part of a large group of ethnically diverse groups of people in parts of Europe and Central, East and West Asia that speak Turkic languages. There are approximately 35 Turkic languages spoken. The most prominent Turkic speaking states are Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. The Uyghurs used to live around

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/uyghur>

a series of oases in the Taklamakan Desert known as the Tarim Basin. The Tarim Basin used to be an independent state, yet is now a small part of the north of China, Xinjiang. On the Figure 1A, Xinjiang is displayed as the orange region, and on Figure 1B, the red region is the Tarim Basin. Around the 10th century most Uyghurs started to identify themselves as Muslims, until in the 16th century they were fully Islamic.

Around 80% of the Uyghur population live in the Tarim Basin. The other 20% lives in the capitol of Xinjiang, Ürümqi. To put into perspective, there are an estimated 10 million Uyghurs living in China<sup>2</sup>. There many Uyghurs living outside of Xinjiang, mostly known as the Taoyuan Uyghurs. These are a significant ethnic minority, living in Turkic countries outside of China.

Figure: 1A



Figure: 1B



## Genocide

Several countries, including the U.S., U.K., Canada and the Netherlands, have accused China of committing genocide. Genocide is the structural killing of a specific group of people with the goal to eliminate a whole ethnic group. To understand the urgency of the matter in China, we need to look at the 10 stages of a genocide<sup>3</sup>.

**1. Classification.** This is the first step to a genocide. The main goal is creating a sense of difference between 'us' and 'them'. This is often not difficult, because a genocide is already based on the fact that a minority is different. This has happened mostly due to religion, but also due to where these people live or their traditions.

**2. Symbolisation.** During this stage the target community needs a specific thing or symbol that sets them apart from the majority and is easily recognisable. This on itself is not necessarily seen as a problem, until it is clearly used to dehumanise the minority. Otherwise it can be seen as cultural identification and a way to be proud of one's culture. Examples of symbolisation in early stages of a genocide are the yellow stars in Germany during World

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Uyghur>

<sup>3</sup> [https://genocideeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten\\_stages\\_of\\_genocide.pdf](https://genocideeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/ten_stages_of_genocide.pdf)



War II or the blue scarves of Khmers in eastern Cambodia during the Cambodian Genocide between 1975 and 1979.

**3. Discrimination.** This stage requires political discrimination within a society. Meaning, the majority creates laws targeted to make life harder for the minority group.

**4. Dehumanisation.** In this stage, governments will spread propaganda to every citizen, making the targeted group feel and look like animals in their eyes. Governments need to ensure that the majority of the country feels like it is needed and justified to murder the targeted minority. If not, the government risks a revolution, coup d'état or a civil war.

**5. Organisation.** In this stage, the state will make preparations to annihilate the targeted group. Special units are trained and armed to facilitate this annihilation as efficiently as possible.

**6. Polarisation.** During polarisation the government will aim to drive a wedge between the majority and target group. Numerous members of the majority might still feel compassion because of their close relationships to the minority, as they might be their neighbour, colleague or partners. These relationships will be banned, by creating separate places to live, work, shop to name a few. During this time the propaganda increases, not only in the amount of propaganda spread but also in how horrible the minority is projected.

**7. Preparation.** In this stage, the government will start advertising the 'purification', the 'Final solution' or any other euphemism so people get used to this and all the details are being perfected.

**8. Persecution.** Once everything is in order, victims of the genocide are identified and persecuted. Due to the symbolisation and polarisation this stage is often short as the majority now willingly accelerates the process due to the propaganda of the government.

**9. Extermination.** This second-last stage is called extermination as killing the minority feels like prosecutors are not killing or murdering, because the victims have been dehumanised and are thus considered animals. At this point, an armed intervention is required to stop the genocide, by either NATO or the UN.

**10. Denial.** All the evidence gets destroyed once the genocide is complete. Bodies of victims are burned or put into 'secret' graves. The government will block any investigations and the leaders will flee the country if needed. The best response to denial is punishment by an international tribunal or national courts.

## Re-education camps

Re-education camps, in the context of the Uyghur situation, refer to facilities established by the Chinese government in the Xinjiang Region. Officially termed as "Vocational Education and Training Centres," the purpose of these camps are to provide re-education to combat



religious extremism and separatism. However, numerous reports and survivor testimonies suggest that these camps are used for the mass detention of Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups, where they are subjected to forced indoctrination, surveillance, and, in many cases, abuse.

The importance of re-education camps in the Uyghur situation lies in the international concern and controversy they have generated. The camps are viewed as a significant human rights issue, with allegations of cultural genocide due to the suppression of Uyghur language, religion, and culture. The existence and operation of these camps highlight issues of ethnic and religious discrimination, and have led to widespread condemnation from various governments, human rights organisations, and the United Nations, thereby impacting China's international relations and raising questions about global responses to human rights violations. You can also argue that these camps are a part of Polarisation and therefore a big part in an Uyghur genocide.

## General Overview

The situation of the Uyghur people in China has gained widespread international attention due to allegations of human rights abuses and discrimination. Over the past decade, reports and testimonies have emerged suggesting systematic and severe human rights violations against the Uyghur population, raising concerns on a global scale. These testimonies were posted on BBC news where, for the first time, satellite pictures were shown of the camps. There were also 5,000 Chinese police pictures posted after hacking their database. The link to this article is in the bibliography and you are encouraged to read it, due to the fact it gives names and faces to victims and therefore helps with the humanisation of the issue.

One of the most contentious aspects of the Uyghur situation is the existence and operation of re-education camps, officially known as Vocational Education and Training Centres. The Chinese government claims that these facilities aim to combat religious extremism and separatism by providing vocational training and re-education. However, numerous reports from international organisations, independent researchers, and Uyghur survivors indicate that the camps are, in reality, used for mass arbitrary detention. Uyghurs are allegedly subjected to forced indoctrination, surveillance, torture, and other forms of abuse within these facilities. The relevance of the Uyghur situation to the United Nations lies in the organisation's mandate to protect and promote human rights globally. The UN Charter underscores the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and the protection of fundamental freedoms for all individuals, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or religion. The reported violations against the Uyghurs raise questions about China's adherence to these principles and have prompted international scrutiny. Several UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, have addressed the Uyghur situation. Various countries have expressed concerns, calling for independent investigations and accountability for those responsible for human rights abuses. The UN has a pivotal role in



fostering dialogue and diplomatic efforts to address these concerns. However, challenges arise due to geopolitical considerations, as some countries hesitate to confront China directly on this issue, reflecting the complexities of balancing human rights advocacy with diplomatic relations.

The situation of the Uyghur people also intersects with broader debates on sovereignty, the responsibility to protect, and the role of international institutions in addressing internal affairs of member states. The allegations against China raise questions about the adequacy of existing mechanisms within the UN framework to address situations where a member state is accused of widespread human rights abuses.

In conclusion, the situation of the Uyghur people in China is a critical human rights issue that directly affects everyone. As the international community grapples with finding an appropriate response, the Uyghur situation becomes worse and worse, leading to more lives lost. This situation is posing a challenge to the effectiveness and relevance of the UN in upholding its core principles.

## Major Parties Involved

### **China and the Chinese government**

The Chinese government, led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), considers Xinjiang a strategically important region due to its vast resources and geographical significance. The government claims that its actions in Xinjiang, including the establishment of re-education camps, aim to counter separatism, extremism, and terrorism. Additionally, Beijing seeks to maintain control over the region to ensure stability and prevent any challenges to its authority. China denies all allegations of human rights violations and a genocide and maintains that its policies aim at countering extremism and promoting stability.

### **Major human rights organisations**

Many human rights organisations, such as but not limited to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have been investigating and documenting alleged human rights abuses, raising awareness and advocating for international action to address the situation in Xinjiang.

### **The United Nations**

The UN has a mandate to promote and protect human rights worldwide. Various UN bodies, including the Human Rights Council, have been involved in discussions and resolutions related to the Uyghur situation. Some countries have called for stronger actions, while others have defended China's policies.



They have taken measures, which sadly did not have enough impact. The UN human rights bodies, including the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), have expressed concerns about reports of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. These concerns include allegations of arbitrary detention, forced labour, and cultural and religious repression against Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. But, after raising concerns, no direct measures were taken against China.

Various UN officials have called for China to allow independent observers into Xinjiang to assess the situation. There have been requests for thorough, transparent, and unbiased investigations into the allegations of human rights violations. But these were not accepted by China.

### **The United States**

The U.S. has been a vocal critic of China's treatment of the Uyghurs. The U.S. government, under multiple administrations, has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials and entities over human rights concerns<sup>4</sup>. This is part of a broader geopolitical tension between the U.S. and China, which of course includes Taiwan.

### **The United Kingdom**

The UK has been critical of China's actions in Xinjiang and the British government has imposed sanctions on Chinese officials and entities, expressing concerns about human rights violations against the Uyghur population.

### **Canada**

Canada has expressed concerns about the situation in Xinjiang and has taken steps to address human rights abuses. The Canadian government, along with like-minded countries, has condemned China's actions and called for independent investigations and have put up sanctions against China.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/u-s-imposes-sanctions-on-china-over-human-rights-abuses-of-uyghurs>



## Timeline of Events

- 1990s-2000s: During this period, there was a rise in ethnic tensions in Xinjiang between Uyghurs and Han Chinese settlers. The Chinese government began implementing stringent policies aimed at integrating the region more closely with China, often at the expense of Uyghur cultural and religious practices.
- 2009: The Urumqi Riots
- July 2009: Ethnic violence erupted in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, leading to significant deaths and injuries. These riots marked a significant escalation in the conflict and led to a more robust response from the Chinese government, including increased security measures in the region.
- 2010s: Tightening Control from the Chinese government towards the Uyghurs
- 2014: China launched the “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” in Xinjiang, significantly increasing surveillance and police presence, ostensibly to combat terrorism and extremism.
- 2017: Emergence of Re-education Camps
- April 2017: Reports began to emerge about the existence of re-education camps detaining large numbers of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. Satellite imagery and personal testimonies started to reveal the scale of these facilities.
- 2018: International Awareness and Responses
- August 2018: A United Nations human rights panel cited credible reports that over a million Uyghurs were being held in counter-extremism centres in Xinjiang. The international community began to pay more attention to the situation.
- 2019: Escalating International Condemnation
- July 2019: Twenty-two countries at the UN Human Rights Council issued a joint statement condemning China's treatment of the Uyghurs. Later in October, a similar statement was made, this time by 23 countries.





- June 2020: The U.S. passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, imposing sanctions against Chinese officials deemed responsible for human rights violations in Xinjiang.
- October 2020: The Chinese government officially acknowledged the existence of the re-education camps but described them as vocational training centres.
- March 2021: Coordinated sanctions were imposed on Chinese officials by the European Union, United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States due to human rights abuses in Xinjiang.
- Throughout 2021: Further reports, including leaked documents and first-hand survivor testimonies, continued to emerge, painting a dire picture of the situation in Xinjiang.
- 2022: The situation in Xinjiang remained a significant point of tension in China's international relations, with ongoing debates and diplomatic actions focused on the Uyghur issue.

## Previous attempts to solve the issue

### **Diplomatic Pressure and International Statements:**

One of the initial and ongoing attempts to address the Uyghur situation involves diplomatic pressure, primarily exerted through the United Nations and various multinational coalitions. For instance, in 2019 and 2020, groups of countries, including Western nations, issued joint statements at the United Nations Human Rights Council condemning the treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. These statements urged the Chinese government to respect human rights, particularly the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. While these diplomatic efforts did not compel China to alter its policies significantly, they succeeded in raising international awareness and signalling global concern about the situation.

### **Economic Sanctions and Legislative Measures:**

Another approach taken, particularly by western countries like the United States, Canada, and members of the European Union, involves the imposition of economic sanctions. The U.S., for example, passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, which imposed sanctions on Chinese officials believed to be responsible for human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Additionally, there have been moves to block goods suspected of being produced with forced labour from entering international markets. While these sanctions have put economic pressure on China, their impact on changing the Chinese government's policies in Xinjiang is



debatable. However, they have heightened international scrutiny and have had some influence on global supply chain considerations regarding Xinjiang.

### **Human Rights Advocacy and Reporting:**

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international human rights bodies have consistently worked to document and report on the situation in Xinjiang. Organisations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as independent journalists and researchers, have played a critical role in gathering evidence, including survivor testimonies and satellite imagery. These efforts have been crucial in bringing the Uyghur issue to the forefront of international human rights discussions. While they haven't directly resulted in policy changes within China, they have been instrumental in informing global public opinion and keeping the issue on the international agenda.

## **Possible solutions**

Seeing as China is uncooperative in providing information on the issue, gaining trustworthy inside information is critical. It is also important to realise that once the UN does take immediate action, international tension.

It could be argued that removing all the Uyghur people out of Xinjiang could be a possibility, however this requires international cooperation and moving 12 million people out of their homes which too would be a violation of human rights.

## **Important documents**

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