

Nowhere feels safe: Uyghurs tell of China-led intimidation campaign abroad

It has been nearly three years since China launched an unprecedented mass campaign of mass detention of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in northwestern China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang).

During this time, details about the treatment of the estimated 1 million or more people who have been held in "transformation-through-education" or "vocational training" centres have continued to trickle out. But the true scope and nature of what is taking place in Xinjiang remains obscured.

The Chinese government originally denied the existence of the detention camps. Later, it began claiming that the facilities were "vocational training" centres to help rid Uyghurs and others of their "extremist" thoughts and provide them with job training – even highly educated intellectuals, businesspeople and retirees.

The Chinese government has steadfastly resisted calls to admit independent monitors into the region, allowing only carefully stage-managed tours for select journalists and diplomats. Meanwhile, friends and relatives of people believed to be detained remain cut off from information and [unsure where their loved ones are](#).

In late 2019, leaked documents reported by [the New York Times](#) and [the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and 17 partner organizations](#), exposed new details about China's campaign in Xinjiang. The documents reveal how the campaign to transform the thinking of people in Xinjiang originated with Chinese President Xi Jinping's call in 2014 for a "struggle against terrorism, infiltration and separatism" in Xinjiang. The documents also show how, after taking over as Xinjiang Party Secretary in August 2016, Chen Quanguo ordered local officials to "round up everyone who should be rounded up". Secret operations manuals directed in great detail how "re-education" camps should be managed. Officials were briefed on what to tell children about their detained parents, which included warnings about repercussions if they spoke openly about the detentions.

Another thing that emerges clearly from the leaked documents is the global scope of China's campaign against Uyghurs, Kazakhs and others originally from Xinjiang, with Chinese embassies and consulates abroad tasked with collecting information about members of these ethnic groups residing in other countries. The aggressiveness of China's effort to track down members of these diaspora communities has been deeply felt, as the nine accounts highlighted here show.

Uyghurs abroad living in fear

An estimated 1–1.6 million Uyghurs live outside China, according to the World Uyghur Congress, a federation of Uyghur exile communities registered in Germany. Significant diasporic communities of Uyghurs can be found in the Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Smaller communities live in other countries, including Afghanistan, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Norway, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United States.

Between September 2018 and September 2019 Amnesty International collated information from approximately 400 Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and members of other ethnic groups living in 22 countries across five continents. These accounts, obtained through face-to-face interviews and via an online questionnaire circulated among a closed pool of trusted Uyghur contacts, reveal the harassment and fear being experienced by these communities on a daily basis. In this respect, the accounts match with earlier findings about the experiences of [Uyghurs living in the United States, such as a those documented in August 2019 by the Uyghur Human Rights Project](#).

Uyghurs living in diaspora overseas have generally been very reluctant to talk about their detained or missing relatives in Xinjiang, fearing possible retaliation against either themselves or other relatives in Xinjiang. About two thirds of those who spoke to Amnesty International requested anonymity, citing fear of reprisals from the authorities.

Several Uyghur interviewees living overseas told Amnesty International that local authorities in Xinjiang had targeted their relatives as a way to suppress the activities of Uyghur communities living abroad. Individuals reported being warned that family members would be detained if they did not return to Xinjiang or that they would not be able to see their family again if they refused to provide information about other Uyghurs living in their communities.

The result of these measures is that Uyghurs in diaspora communities often live in fear and refrain from speaking about the situation in Xinjiang, including sharing what they know about the detention camps; what they have learned about their relatives in Xinjiang; or even if they have lost contact with relatives back home.

China uses messaging apps to harass Uyghurs across the globe

Interviewees told Amnesty that the only tool they could use to communicate with their relatives in Xinjiang is WeChat – a Chinese social media and messaging tool similar to a combined version of Facebook and WhatsApp (both of which are banned in China) – although they are aware that their communication on the platform is unencrypted and subject to monitoring by the Chinese authorities. Some even refrain from any form of communication on WeChat, limiting themselves to monitoring updates posted by their relatives on the platform. Many also reported that the Chinese authorities had used social messaging apps to track and intimidate them.

Yunus Tohti was a student in Egypt when Chinese police contacted him through WeChat. He was asked when he would return to Xinjiang and was ordered to provide personal details, such as a copy of his passport. Fearing he was no longer safe in Egypt, Yunus fled from Egypt to Turkey and later arrived in the Netherlands. A few months later, the police in Xinjiang called Yunus' brother, who had stayed in Egypt. They told him they were standing next to his parents and that he should return to Xinjiang – which he understood to be an implicit threat against his parents' safety. Yunus Tohti subsequently lost contact with his family in Xinjiang and worries that they may have been detained or worse.

Uyghurs living in France, Germany and Iran also told Amnesty International of being contacted by Chinese police via WeChat and being asked to provide information, such as their ID numbers, locations of residence, passport photos and even ID information of their spouses.

Erkin (pseudonym) is a Uyghur living in the United States who told Amnesty International he was even contacted by Chinese domestic security agents on WhatsApp, which few Chinese use because it is blocked by China's firewall. They sent him a video of his father asking him to cooperate with the agents and told him they would issue his parents passports and let them emigrate to the United States if he did so. They tried to establish a rapport with him, saying they were his father's friends and could arrange for regular video chats with his relatives if he cooperated with them.

Erkin asked what the security agents wanted, but they did not explain further. He stopped responding, and they stopped contacting him after two days. "I still have no information about all my family members and relatives," he told Amnesty International on 30 August 2019.

Intimidating phone calls to obtain personal information

Gulruy Asqar is a teacher living in the United States. Her brother, Husenjan, is a prominent linguist in Xinjiang who has published a Uyghur-Chinese dictionary.

Starting in 2018, Gulruy began receiving frequent telephone calls from the Chinese consulate in Houston. A recorded message informed her that she needed to speak to a staff member about an important document that she needed to submit. Each time, a Chinese person on the other end of the call would come on and ask her for her name, date of birth and other personal details. Each time, Gulruy refused and hung up the phone.

Finally, she confronted the man on the other end of the telephone and told him that she was a US citizen and that she did not care about their document. The calls stopped, but she began receiving telephone calls from a Chinese mail delivery company. She doubted that her family would be sending her anything from Xinjiang, given how fearful they were to contact her. She suspected these calls – which she has heard are "quite common" among the Uyghur diaspora – were another attempt to obtain her personal information.

In early 2019, Gulruy Asqar heard from friends that her brother Husenjan had likely been detained in Xinjiang. She has since been unable to get any further information about his situation or whereabouts.

Dilnur Enwer, who is living in Montreal, also said that she has received repeated calls from the Chinese embassy and unidentified people since her arrival in Canada in January 2019. Dilnur, who has applied for asylum, said that she is afraid to go to pick up an "important" document from the Chinese embassy as requested. Before all contact with her relatives in Xinjiang was cut off, her relative, who might have heard some information from the police in Xinjiang, had warned that the embassy would "catch" her and send her back to Xinjiang if she did not return voluntarily. She has been afraid to

speak of her parents' detention in April 2017 out of fears for her own safety and the safety of her other relatives back in Xinjiang.

Eldana Abbas, a Uyghur activist and interpreter from Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, currently lives in Australia. She described receiving similar calls from the Chinese Embassy in Canberra in 2018 and 2019. The calls left her feeling as if her safety and the safety of her family were under threat.

"I felt like I needed to watch out for people around me and around my house," she said. She said she has seen individuals and groups of people she believes to be Chinese agents photographing her and her friends during their activities.

Uyghurs targeted for speaking out

Abdurehim Gheni, a well-known Uyghur activist in the Netherlands, told Amnesty International that he was also regularly followed and intimidated by unidentified persons he believes to be Chinese. Abdurehim said he was photographed and threatened at the weekly one-man peaceful demonstrations he had held since June 2018 around Dam Square in Amsterdam.

He said that, on one occasion in October 2018, three Chinese men and a woman appeared near his protest site and began shouting to people nearby that Abdurehim was "spreading false information" and "deserve[d] to die" for "damaging China's reputation". They reportedly warned that he would "soon be destroyed" if he continued. He has also received death threats by telephone.

While it is not clear whether the group were acting on behalf of the Chinese authorities, these threats against his life and safety led Abdurehim to seek support from the Dutch police, who began stationing a police vehicle near his protests and provided him with a direct contact number to call in case he felt in danger.

Rushan Abbas told Amnesty International that her life was turned upside down after her sister Gulshan was taken away in Xinjiang in September 2018. "There isn't a day that I have not spoken out about this horrendous atrocity," said Rushan, a Uyghur activist in the United States who is also the executive director of Campaign for Uyghurs, a non-profit advocacy group based in the USA.

Rushan believes that her sister, a retired medical doctor, was taken away just days after Rushan made a speech about the mass detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang. "That's a tactic by Beijing to silence me and stop my legal activism in the United States," she said.

Rushan has since come under attack by Chinese official media, such as [the Global Times](#), which has accused her of being an "separatist" and spreading rumours about the detention of Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

Climate of mistrust as China seeks to recruit informants

Adding to the pressure on those living abroad are aggressive efforts by Chinese security officials to recruit informants to spy on others in overseas Uyghur communities. Not

knowing who among them might be reporting back to Chinese security agents plants seeds of suspicion and mistrust that take root and further feed the sense of isolation and fear. The omnipresence of these feelings is contributing to a growing crisis of despair and depression among the diaspora communities.

Ismail Osman, a Uyghur factory worker currently living in the Netherlands said: “Chinese policemen asked my brother [in Xinjiang for] my phone number. In November 2014, [the Chinese police] approached my brother and forced him to call me. They took over the phone call and told me that I had to provide information [to spy] on other Uyghurs in the Netherlands. Otherwise they would take [away] my brother.”

Musajan (pseudonym), who also lives in the Netherlands, said that he was contacted over WeChat by an ex-classmate who now works for China’s security police. The man asked him to gather information about other Uyghurs living in the Netherlands and send it to him. Musajan said he found the request so intimidating that he removed WeChat from his mobile phone.

States must protect Uyghurs from deportation threat

One reason Uyghurs fear the Chinese authorities knowing so much about their whereabouts overseas is awareness that other governments have been pressured by China to repatriate Uyghurs who have left China. In 2015, for example, Thailand returned more than 100 Uyghurs who had sought refuge in the country. Egypt deported 16 students at the behest of the Chinese authorities in 2017, including [Yiliyasijiang Reheman](#). Chinese Uyghurs living abroad fear that, if they were to be returned, they would inevitably end up detained in Xinjiang’s “re-education” camps. For those awaiting asylum status in the countries where they are staying, deportation is a source of tremendous stress and concern, especially when they are also afraid of being spied on by others in their communities.

This fear is compounded when Uyghurs living overseas are told by Chinese diplomatic offices in their countries of residence that they can only renew their Chinese passports by returning to Xinjiang. These fears are not unfounded. According to one of the recently leaked documents, “[Bulletin No. 2](#)”, Chinese embassies and consulates subject Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups to individualized screening if they apply to renew their Chinese passports or obtain a visa to return to China. Their particulars are checked by authorities in Xinjiang against an “integrated platform” of data obtained through [sweeping programme of mass surveillance](#). If the authorities decide on the basis of this screening that “suspected terrorism cannot be ruled out”, then these individuals are likely to be arrested or sent for “re-education”.

States have an obligation under international law to comply with the principle of *non-refoulement* by ensuring that people are not returned, either directly or indirectly, to a country where there is a real risk of serious human rights violations or abuses.

Since 2018, Germany and Sweden have officially made commitments not to deport to China Uyghurs or members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups from Xinjiang.

A strong [resolution by the European Parliament \(2019/2945\[RSP\]\)](#) on the situation of the Uyghurs in China passed by an overwhelming majority on 19 December 2019. The European Parliament expressed deep concern over reports of harassment of Uyghurs abroad by the Chinese authorities in order to force them to act as informants against other Uyghurs, return to Xinjiang or remain silent about the situation there, sometimes by detaining their family members. The resolution calls on the EU to step up its efforts to protect Uyghur residents and EU citizens in member states from harassment and intimidation by the Chinese authorities. The resolution also calls on the Chinese authorities to end the ongoing crackdown involving detention, judicial harassment and intimidation.

Chinese government intimidation of Uyghurs and Chinese nationals in the United States was an issue also cited in the amended legislative proposal for the UIGHUR Act of 2019, a bill that passed in the US House of Representatives by a vote of 407-1 on 3 December 2019.

It is now vital that all countries hosting members of the Uyghur diaspora take measures to protect them from the threat of deportation to China, where they would be at risk of being sent to an internment camp in Xinjiang.

Recommendations –

To the Chinese government:

- Stop all kinds of harassment and intimidation against Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups living overseas.
- Close the political “re-education camps” and release detainees immediately and unconditionally.
- Repeal or amend all laws and regulations, and end all related measures, that impermissibly restrict the rights of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups and stop using “extremism” and “terrorism” as an excuse to restrict religious and cultural practices.
- Stop requesting other countries to return individuals to China in violation of the *non-refoulement* principle.
- Provide unrestricted access to UN human rights experts, independent researchers and journalists to Xinjiang to conduct independent investigation about what is happening in the region.

To second governments:

- Take specific measures to ensure that members of the diasporic communities of Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups residing in their countries are protected from intimidation by Chinese embassies and agents and stop their repatriation to China.