



Briefing note on allegations that China is holding millions of Uighurs in concentration camps

Over the last year, allegations that China is interning large numbers of Muslim citizens of Xinjiang province in internment camps have been given enormous media prominence. Reports cite “the UN” as a source for claims that up to a million people could be interned in these camps, a claim repeatedly made by US officials, while US Defence Department Asia chief Randall Schriver has stated that the total could be “closer to three million citizens”

(<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/may/04/us-accuses-china-of-using-concentrationcamps-uighur-muslim-minority>).

These claims have been taken up in Britain and used to agitate against China, including by elements on the left. Some of these (such as those who protested at the presence of a Chinese speaker at the



Marx Oration) are groups who have always attacked socialist countries but others include anti-racist and anti-Islamophobia campaigners who have a good record of solidarity with the broad left.

The alleged persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang, presented sometimes as a bid to crush Uighur culture, is seen by these campaigners as analogous to Islamophobia in the West and the increasing persecution of Muslims in some other Asian countries (e.g. Modi's India, Aung San Suu Kyi's Burma).

Together with the extradition protests in Hong Kong (which have been widely misrepresented as an attempt by the mainland to impose its legal system on Hong Kong) and allegations that China is harvesting the organs of members of the Falun Gong mystic cult (which form part of a racist Chinese organ-harvesting trope that dates back to the 19th century in the West) the so-called "concentration camps" as the US State Department calls them are being used to attack the Chinese government, and may prove problematic for development of co-operation between trade unions and Chinese counterparts, the development of a co-operative relationship between a future Labour government and China etc.

What is the basis of the allegations?

First it is important to state that the claim has never been made by "the UN." A fuller treatment of this question is available on <https://www.globalresearch.ca/no-the-un-did-not-report-china-has-massive-internment-camps-for-uighur-muslims/5652242>.

The claim came from a report from the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on August 10 2018. This is a "body of independent experts" and the claim specifically derived from the committee's sole US member Gay McDougall, who stated that she was "deeply concerned" at "credible reports" of the mass detention of Uighur Muslims.

McDougall did not specify her source for these reports at that meeting.

However, in reporting on the allegation news agencies have cited similar reports from the Network of Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), a body which is based in Washington DC and takes a consistent line attacking the Chinese government. Over 99 per cent of this body's funding is from government grants. It does not specify which governments fund it; evidence suggests



it is the US (see above link). Even if other governments are funding it this gives the lie to the idea that it is a neutral or objective organisation. CHRD's own report seems to rely on information from mostly US-linked sources, with the most referenced source of claims being Radio Free Asia, a US government-created anti-communist news agency.

The claim by McDougall is not based on any specific investigation but on allegations from partisan sources.

Numerous news reports cite satellite imagery which the US says shows there is a network of camps being built in Xinjiang. These photographs, together with “witness accounts of overcrowded facilities” and “public spending on detention facilities,” were cited as the basis for the claim made by German researcher Adrian Zenz in March 2019 that up to “1.5 million” people could be detained in camps. This claim was made at a meeting in Geneva, presumably again to associate it with the UN, though the event in question was organised by the US mission. Zenz admitted at the meeting that the figure was “speculative” ([https:// www.uyghurcongress.org/en/1-5-million-muslims-could-be-detained-in-chinas-xinjiangacademic/](https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/1-5-million-muslims-could-be-detained-in-chinas-xinjiangacademic/)).

Zenz is presented as a China expert; he is a born-again Christian anthropologist who lectures at the European School of Culture and Theology in Korntal and whose previous work has largely consisted of allegations that China is suppressing/eliminating Tibetan culture. The school in question is an evangelical Christian institution formerly called the Academy for World Mission. Zenz's claims have been broadcast by the Germany-based

(formerly US-based) World Uyghur Congress (WUC), a separatist organisation that holds Xinjiang's status as an autonomous region of China to be an illegitimate occupation of the land it terms East Turkestan. The WUC is partly funded by the US State Department's National Endowment for Democracy.

The photographs on their own do not demonstrate much. If accurate, all they establish is that there are detention facilities in Xinjiang. China has invited UN human rights commissioner Michelle Bachelet to visit Xinjiang and says she can visit any detention facilities she wishes to. Ms Bachelet has visited China but the results of the visit have not been announced.



What does China say is happening?

China rejects the claims that Uighur Muslims are subject to mass internment in Xinjiang and says the figures being promoted by the US State Department and World Uyghur Congress are baseless. The above assessment suggests that they are indeed highly speculative if not plucked out of thin air.

China acknowledges the existence of re-education camps and that it is sending Islamist extremists to these camps, albeit not in anything like the numbers that it is accused of doing.

China has devoted greater attention to countering Islamist movements since 2014. In Xinjiang, the jihadist East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) has long called for the creation of an independent Islamic state in Xinjiang known as East Turkestan and seeks to establish this by terrorist means; it is recognised as a terrorist movement by most governments including the US and British. It sometimes uses the names East Turkestan Islamic Party or Turkestan Islamic Party.

China says ETIM has grown closer to al-Qaida and Isis in recent years. The organisation is not formally backed by Turkey but the Istanbul-based East Turkestan Education and Solidarity Organisation is accused by China and Syria of facilitating the movement of ETIM fighters into Syria to fight for jihadist groups against the government. Syria directly accuses Turkey's government of assisting this process. In 2017, Syrian authorities estimated the number of Uighurs fighting in jihadist formations within Syria at 5,000.

Islamist attacks within China have been increasing since 2014, and China associates this partly with jihadists returned from conflict zones such as Syria and points to the growth of Isis across much of central Asia including in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Isis first publicly beheaded a Chinese hostage, Fan Jinghui, in November 2015. In December 2015 Isis first started disseminating Mandarin-language materials exhorting Chinese Muslims to “wake up and take up weapons” (<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/china>).

But Isis activity follows previous terror attacks by radical Islamists associated with the ETIM tradition. As elsewhere, the victims of these attacks are as likely to be Uighurs considered insufficiently aligned with certain varieties of Islam as non-Uighurs; a prominent victim in 2014 was the imam of China's



oldest mosque, Juma Tayir, an advocate of good relations between Xinjiang's different ethnic groups who was stabbed to death by extremists in Kashgar. This murder was celebrated by supposedly non-violent "humanitarian" Uighur organisations like the East Turkestan Education and Solidarity Organisation.

Efforts to clamp down on the spread of al-Qaida-type ideologies in Xinjiang have officially included a number of "strike hard" campaigns aimed at preventing terrorist incidents, including by increased surveillance, collection of biometric data and satellite tracking of vehicles. Xinjiang Chairman (a post equivalent to the governor of a Chinese province; Xinjiang, like Tibet, is an autonomous region rather than a province) Shohrat Zakir, incidentally a Uighur, says that "vocational schools" have been set up to re-educate people influenced by Islamist extremism and that these are proving successful.

What should we make of the Chinese claims?

China's narrative that forms of extremist Islamist ideology have been a growing problem in Xinjiang is based on solid evidence in the form of existing organisations with publicly available manifestos and which claim responsibility for known terrorist incidents. There is good evidence of a flow of Uighur separatists into the Syrian conflict and China is not alone in facing the problem of "radicalised" and battle-hardened jihadists returning to fight their war at home. While the spread of al-Qaida type ideology suggests the presence of wider social problems, it is clearly not confined to Xinjiang and of a pattern with its spread across the Muslim world since the invasion of Iraq. There is no reason to doubt the broader thrust of China's official narrative.

This is not to say that CP members need endorse every aspect of Chinese policy in the region. There is considerable evidence that the "strike hard" campaigns have been perceived as unfairly targeting Uighur communities in Xinjiang and are seen by many as racist in much the way Britain's Prevent strategy has been in Muslim communities in Britain. Xi Jinping's government has launched a wider campaign across China to promote atheism and has specifically acted to shut down religious operations seen as hostile to "socialism with Chinese characteristics,"; some unauthorised churches have been closed, though again the sources suggesting this is a large-scale issue are not neutral. While Western claims that large numbers of mosques are being closed in Xinjiang have not been substantiated, it is likely that some have been where the local imam is regarded as an ideological



problem by the authorities. While there may well be “vocational schools” providing re-education for those who volunteer for it, it seems far fetched that China would actually wait on Isis and al-Nusra veterans to opt for these courses. However, Western claims that those interned are interned without having gone through any judicial process are reliant on the same flawed sources referenced earlier.

Final background: the bigger picture

Xinjiang has been part of China proper since the 18th century but parts have been incorporated in the Chinese empire at various times dating back to the Han in the 2nd century BC. As long ago as the mid-600s AD there is evidence of mixed communities of Han Chinese, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Mongols and others inhabiting Xinjiang, a central Asian region bordering Kazakhstan, Russia and Mongolia. Claims that the Han Chinese are recent arrivals are misleading.

Claims that China is suppressing Uighur culture in Xinjiang are not backed up by the evidence. As an autonomous region Xinjiang has more independence than a Chinese province and education at all school grades and university is available in Uighur. Uighur schools exist alongside Chinese-language schools as there is also a large Han Chinese population. Some reports refer to Uighur families sending their children to Han Chinese schools because they believe it will improve their children’s prospects to grow up fluent in the national language, and it has been suggested that this is a threat to the survival of Uighur culture, although in countries like India or the Soviet Union widespread education in English/ Russian did not lead to a decline in native languages and in any case where this happens it is a choice by the family concerned.

Xinjiang is home to two-thirds of the world’s rare earths. These elements are “applicable to the production of high-performance magnets, catalysts, alloys, glasses, and electronics” and are a scarce and sought-after resource in many high-tech industries. The US is heavily dependent on rare earth imports from China, and China has hinted at cutting off supply as part of the escalating trade war between the two countries. The US has a heavy military presence in central Asia, sees Xinjiang as a resource-rich region which its corporations are largely excluded from and in any case would welcome a break-up of China that could reduce its global power and influence much as the collapse



of the Soviet Union did for Russia. This is no doubt why the US sees organisations such as China Human Rights Defenders and the World Uyghur Congress as worth funding. It is probably not an accident that the furore over Xinjiang comes alongside worsening Washington-Beijing relations.

Kenny Coyle has, for this party, written an excellent pamphlet on the lies and misinformation surrounding Tibet's inclusion in China and pointed to the curious "two million deaths" figure which has no obvious source but was used by Tibetan separatism advocates for decades without ever changing. It is suggested that the stories about Xinjiang are similarly embellished and the figures being cited by a range of organisations and repeated unquestioningly by many media sources and some left-wing activists are not credible or evidenced.