

Xinjiang and the world

The persecution of the Uyghurs is a crime against humanity

It is also the gravest example of a worldwide attack on human rights

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The first stories from Xinjiang were hard to believe. Surely the Chinese government was not running a gulag for Muslims? Surely Uyghurs were not being branded “extremists” and locked up simply for praying in public or growing long beards? Yet, as we report in this week’s China section (see [article](#)), the evidence of a campaign against the Uyghurs at home and abroad becomes more shocking with each scouring of the satellite evidence, each leak of official documents and each survivor’s pitiful account.

In 2018 the government pivoted from denying the camps’ existence to calling them “vocational education and training centres”—a kindly effort to help backward people gain marketable skills. The world should instead heed Uyghur victims of China’s coercive indoctrination. Month after month, inmates say, they are drilled to renounce extremism and put their faith in “Xi Jinping Thought” rather than the Koran. One told us that guards ask prisoners if there is a God, and beat those who say there is. And the camps are only part of a vast system of social control.

China’s 12m Uyghurs are a small, disaffected minority. Their Turkic language is distant from Chinese. They are mostly Muslim. A tiny handful have carried out terrorist attacks, including a bombing in a market in 2014 that left 43 people dead. No terrorist incidents have occurred since 2017: proof, the government says, that tighter security and anti-extremism classes have made Xinjiang safe again. That is one way of putting it. Another is that, rather than catching the violent few, the government has in effect put all Uyghurs into an open-air prison. The aim appears to be to crush the spirit of an entire people.

Even those outside the camps have to attend indoctrination sessions. Any who fail to gush about China’s president risk internment. Families must watch other families, and report suspicious behaviour. New evidence suggests that hundreds of thousands of Uyghur children may have been separated from one or both detained parents. Many of these temporary orphans are in boarding schools, where they are punished for speaking their own language.

Party cadres, usually Han Chinese, are stationed in Uyghur homes, a policy known as “becoming kin”.

Rules against having too many children are strictly enforced on Uyghur women; some are sterilised. Official data show that in two prefectures the Uyghur birth rate fell by more than 60% from 2015 to 2018. Uyghur women are urged to marry Han Chinese men and rewarded if they do with a flat, a job or even a relative being spared the camps. Intimidation extends beyond China’s borders. Because all contact with the outside world is deemed suspect, Uyghurs abroad fear calling home lest they cause a loved one to be arrested, as a harrowing report in *1843*, our sister magazine, describes (see [article](#)).

The persecution of the Uyghurs is a crime against humanity: it entails the forced transfer of people, the imprisonment of an identifiable group and the disappearance of individuals. Systematically imposed by a government, it is the most extensive violation in the world today of the principle that individuals have a right to liberty and dignity simply because they are people.

China’s ruling party has no truck with this concept of individual rights. It claims legitimacy from its record of providing stability and economic growth to the many. Its appeal to the majority may well command popular support. Accurate polling is all but impossible in a dictatorship, and censorship insulates ordinary Chinese from the truth about their rulers. But many Chinese people clearly do back their government, especially since to object is deemed unpatriotic (see [article](#)). Awkward minorities, such as Tibetans and Uyghurs, have no protection in such a system. Unbound by notions of individual rights, the regime has been determined to terrorise them into submission and force them to assimilate into the dominant Han culture.

China lies at the extreme of a worrying trend. Globally, democracy and human rights are in retreat. Although this began before covid-19, 80 countries have regressed since the pandemic began and only Malawi has improved, says Freedom House, a think-tank. Many people, when scared, yearn to be led to safety by a strong ruler. The virus offers governments an excuse to seize emergency powers and ban protests (see [article](#)).

Abusive rulers often rally the majority against a minority. India’s prime minister, Narendra Modi, espouses an aggressive Hindu nationalism and treats India’s Muslims as if they were not really citizens. For this, he earns stellar approval ratings. So does Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, who urges the murder of criminal suspects. Hungary’s prime minister crushes democratic institutions and says his opponents are part of a Jewish plot. Brazil’s president celebrates torture and claims that his foreign critics want to colonise the Amazon. In Thailand the king is turning a constitutional monarchy into an absolute one (see [article](#)).

How can those who value liberty resist? Human rights are universal, but many associate them with the West. So when the West's reputation took a battering, after the financial crisis of 2007-08 and the botched war in Iraq, respect for human rights did, too. Although America has imposed targeted sanctions over the Uyghurs, the suspicion that Western preaching was hypocritical has grown under Donald Trump. A transactional president, he has argued that national sovereignty should come first—and not only for America. That suits China just fine. It is working in international forums to redefine human rights as being about subsistence and development, not individual dignity and freedom. This week, along with Russia, it was elected to the UN Human Rights Council.

Start in Xinjiang

Resistance to the erosion of human rights should begin with the Uyghurs. If liberals say nothing about today's single worst violation outside a war zone, how can anyone believe their criticism of other, lesser crimes? Activists should expose and document abuse. Writers and artists can say why human dignity is precious. Companies can refuse to collude. There is talk of boycotts—including, even, of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics.

Ultimately, governments will need to act. They should offer asylum to Uyghurs and, like America, slap targeted sanctions on abusive officials and ban goods made with forced Uyghur labour. They should speak up, too. China's regime is not impervious to shame. If it were proud of its harsh actions in Xinjiang, it would not try to hide them. Nor would it lean on smaller countries to sign statements endorsing its policies there. As the scale of the horror emerges, its propaganda has grown less effective: 15 majority-Muslim countries that had signed such statements have changed their mind. China's image has grown darker in many countries in recent years, polls suggest: 86% of Japanese and 85% of Swedes now have an unfavourable view of the country. For a government that seeks to project soft power, this is a worry.

Some say the West would lose too much by lecturing about human rights—China won't change, and the acrimony will stymie talks about trade, pandemics and climate change. True, keeping human rights separate from such things is impossible, and China will try to convince other countries that moral candour will cause them economic harm. Nonetheless, liberal democracies have an obligation to call a gulag a gulag. In an age of growing global competition, that is what makes them different. If they fail to stand up for liberal values they should not be surprised if others do not respect them, either. ■

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