

China: Travel for Uyghurs Heavily Restricted

February 3, 2025 5:00PM EST

Onerous Requirements, Official Tours Latest Measures to Control Xinjiang Population

(New York) – The [Chinese](#) government is maintaining severe restrictions, conditions, and controls on [Uyghurs](#) who seek to travel abroad in violation of their internationally protected right to leave the country, Human Right Watch said today. The government has permitted Uyghurs in the diaspora to make restricted visits to Xinjiang, but with the apparent aim of presenting a public image of normalcy in the region.

Since the start of the Chinese government's abusive [Strike Hard Campaign](#) in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 2016, Chinese authorities have arbitrarily confiscated passports of Uyghurs in the region and imprisoned Uyghurs for contacting people abroad. While the authorities are now allowing some Uyghurs to apply for or are returning passports for travel internationally, they exert tight control over those who travel.

“The modest thaw in China’s travel restrictions has allowed some Uyghurs to briefly reunite with loved ones abroad after having no news for years, but the Chinese government’s travel restrictions are still used to oppress Uyghurs in Xinjiang and in the diaspora,” said [Yalkun Uluyol](#), China researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The Chinese government continues to deny Uyghurs their right to leave the country, restrict their speech and associations when abroad, and punish them for having foreign ties.”

Human Rights Watch interviewed 23 Uyghurs outside China, and reviewed relevant official documents.

Uyghurs in China applying to visit a foreign country need to provide the authorities with the purpose of travel, Uyghurs who left Xinjiang recently or had met with relatives from Xinjiang said. Those applying for family purposes are also required to provide an invitation from a family member abroad, along with their personal information, address, work status, and other documents.

Permission comes with strict rules: those travelling must not engage with activists abroad or speak critically about the Chinese government, and must return within a specified time, which could range from a few days to several months. In the case of business travel, Uyghurs are only allowed to visit certain countries, such as Kazakhstan, and are prohibited from visiting “sensitive countries” with large Muslim populations, such as Turkey.

One Uyghur whose relative in China was denied a passport said that, “The police showed them my photo and asked, ‘Do you know this person?’ [The relative] said yes. The police then told them to forget about passports.”

Several people interviewed said that the authorities had told them that only “one person from each family [can travel] at the same time,” effectively holding their immediate family members hostage to ensure their return. Some said that the authorities had also required them to provide a “guarantor” – often another official vouching for them – before granting them permission to travel. Failure to comply with these rules puts their guarantor or family members at risk of harsh punishments. While those who were allowed to travel were abroad, a designated official regularly checked in with them and sought updates on their daily activities. Upon their return, the authorities again confiscated their passports and questioned them about their trip and Uyghurs in the countries they visited.

Some Uyghurs living abroad have been able to visit Xinjiang after stringent vetting processes. Those with foreign passports eligible for visa-free travel to China nonetheless have been told by their families that they need to undergo background checks and obtain prior approval from the “neighborhood committee,” a grassroots government unit, and the local police where their families live. Once back in their hometowns in Xinjiang, some have been questioned or required to stay at hotels, not their relatives’ homes.

Uyghurs who are citizens of countries that need a visa to visit China face a much longer application process. The process can take up to six months as the Chinese diplomatic missions abroad carry out in-depth background checks. Even participating in nonpolitical diaspora activities, such as sending their children to Uyghur language schools or attending a wedding in the presence of Uyghur activists can result in a visa being rejected.

Chinese diplomatic missions have directed some Uyghurs living abroad to join officially organized tours to Xinjiang hosted by the Xinjiang United Front Work Department, a Chinese Communist Party body. To take part in these tours, individuals need to provide to the mission a copy of their Chinese national identity cards, passports, and their home addresses in Xinjiang. The list is then sent to China where it goes through various departments such as the police, including the local police station, the public security bureau, and the unit responsible for counterterrorism, as well as the neighborhood committees.

Only approved people can join the official tour. Uyghurs holding foreign passports are additionally required to renounce their Chinese citizenship to take part in these tours. Uyghurs said they joined these official tours as they are a safer option, one that is also faster with an easier visa application process, compared with visiting the region on their own, risking police interrogation and possible detention.

Uyghurs who were on these tours described being closely monitored by their United Front handlers and said that they had to seek permission to visit their families, and to speak Mandarin Chinese, even among themselves. They also reported being made to take part in propaganda activities, such as being provided a script – with pinyin, or phonetic, notations for those not fluent in Mandarin Chinese – praising the Communist Party for its Xinjiang policies.

Through these controlled visits and tours, the Chinese government has continued to control the Uyghur diaspora, some of whom stay silent or shun activism and even Uyghur cultural activities in hopes of resuming contact with their families and visiting the region. Chinese authorities have long engaged in [transnational repression](#) – human rights abuses committed beyond a country’s borders to curtail dissent – against Uyghurs living abroad, targeting activists and those critical of the Chinese government, and their families in Xinjiang.

In accordance with China’s international legal obligations, the Chinese government should allow Uyghurs to travel freely, stop punishing those with foreign ties, and end repressive measures against the Uyghur diaspora. Affected governments should ensure human rights protections of all their citizens and residents against all forms of Chinese government transnational repression.

“Uyghurs are facing stringent conditions and requirements if they want to briefly reunite or even just to communicate with family members in China,” Uluyol said. “Being able to contact or visit loved ones abroad shouldn’t be a privilege granted to a few Uyghurs, but is a right that the Chinese government is obligated to respect.”

Travel Restrictions, Harassment of Uyghurs

China’s government has a history of discriminatory passport policies against Uyghurs, who have long been subjected to especially [stringent processes for passport applications](#). Since the abusive Strike Hard Campaign began in 2016, Chinese authorities have also forced Xinjiang residents to hand in their passports for “safekeeping” and have stopped [renewing passports](#) for Uyghurs living abroad.

The Uyghurs allowed to travel abroad are from Urumqi, the capital, and two other cities in northern Xinjiang. Most Uyghurs remain unable to leave the region, while many living abroad continue to have no news of their families, especially those in long-term imprisonment.

The Chinese government has promoted such visits in both [official media](#) and by distributing [social media posts](#) by government-affiliated Uyghurs in an apparent effort to whitewash its human rights violations in the region. In these articles, the Uyghur participants typically effuse over “the delightful changes in Xinjiang” and say they “deeply experience the warmth ... of the Motherland.”

Methodology

Between October 2024 and February 2025, Human Rights Watch interviewed 23 Uyghurs living in nine countries – Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Turkey – as well as two experts working on Uyghur diasporas. Those interviewed had some family members who were allowed to travel abroad for short visits, or had themselves visited Xinjiang with Chinese government-sponsored tours. A couple had left Xinjiang permanently in recent years, after a long process of obtaining passports and travel permissions.

Human Rights Watch also reviewed photos, documents, and social media chat histories related to government organized tours, in addition to publicly available online sources, including Chinese government press articles and Douyin, Chinese version of TikTok, videos posted by those who visited Xinjiang.

The personal information of those interviewed has been anonymized for their protection.

Human Rights Watch shared its findings and wrote to the Chinese government for comment, but they have not responded.

Uyghurs Travelling out of Xinjiang

One Uyghur living abroad said they were able to meet their mother after eight years of separation, but they could only meet in a third country where the mother had permission to visit for business purposes. She was able to do so after going through a strict background check and agreeing to a gag order:

She was only allowed to travel abroad for 15 days. Neighborhood committees and local police told her to not to engage with “dangerous people,” not to say bad things about the government, and come back before the permitted period. I wished she could stay with us permanently, but I had to send her back because otherwise, our assets could be confiscated, and other relatives may face punishments.

Another person said that the police effectively held their family members hostage to allow their father to travel:

My father had an old passport, which was confiscated by the neighborhood committee a few years ago. He had a guarantor who worked at the government. The authorities only allowed him to go. They said, “your wife might be able to travel once you are back.” He was allowed a one-month visit after a strict background check and signing a letter of promise [to comply with the restrictions]. He tried to extend his stay, but he could not get permission, so he went back, hoping that my mother would then be able to travel. However, the authorities did not issue a passport for my mother. She was told to wait.

Another person said that officials interrogated their father after he returned to Xinjiang:

Officials from the neighborhood committee, the local police station, and the public security bureau visited my father after his return. They asked about whom he met, where he went, and

what he told people. He said, "I met nobody." Which was true, we did not even go to Uyghur restaurants to avoid attention and China's surveillance.

Uyghurs Living Abroad Travelling to Xinjiang

Individual Travel

Uyghurs said that even those holding foreign passports eligible for visa free entry into China were required to undergo background checks before visiting Xinjiang. One person knowledgeable about the situation said:

Many Uyghurs with European passports are travelling back to the homeland for short family visits using the visa-free scheme. Everyone who intends to travel needs to get permission from their original neighborhood committee and the police, and to show the approval letter at the border. Some of them were questioned, while others were told by the authorities to stay at a hotel instead of the homes of their families. Most of these travels were to Urumqi and a few other cities in northern Xinjiang.

A teacher at a Uyghur school abroad said that parents of their students have had their visas to China denied simply for sending their children to the Uyghur school:

At least two of our students' parents were told by the Chinese police and the Chinese diplomatic missions that going to a Uyghur language school [in this country] constitutes an "obstacle" for their and their families' travels [to Xinjiang]. There were also cases of visa denials for this reason. Now, many have stopped sending their kids to language school. Our school had been in operation since 2014 and, as of January 2025, we have stopped operation as our classrooms have become empty.

Another person said:

At a recent wedding ceremony, the hosts requested some Uyghur activists not to come, as there were close relatives of the groom and the bride traveling back and forth [to Xinjiang]. It is unacceptable that even social events are now being tracked down by the Chinese government. It increases distrust among community members.

Government Sponsored Tours to Xinjiang

A Uyghur who participated in a recent official tour to Xinjiang said:

I didn't know if I would ever have another chance to see my family, which is why I chose to participate in the tour. I realized everything was orchestrated, the tour was closely surveilled by police, and I had to ask for permission from the neighborhood committee and the local police to stay with my family after the tour.

Another person said:

We were welcomed by the United Front Work Department in Xinjiang. We were immediately taken on the tour. The tour could last between 7 and 15 days, depending on the program. Everyone in the group were Uyghurs, the tour guides were also Uyghurs. But everyone was asked to speak in Chinese. We visited shops, museums, and mosques, like a typical propaganda tour that you can watch on YouTube. The last day was a meeting with high-level officials. Some of us were given scripts, written by officials, to express our gratitude for the Chinese government. After the tour, after registering with and obtaining the approval of the local neighborhood committee and the police station, I was able to spend a few days with my family.

Another person described a similar experience:

Everything looked faked and was prepared for us. But when I was able to walk around the city, I could see the empty mosques, men without beards, little kids who could no longer speak Uyghur. I could hardly recognize the city I once knew.

Impact on Uyghur Diaspora

Many Uyghurs in the diaspora still do not have contact with their family members. One Uyghur said:

Some people close to the Chinese diplomatic missions here asked me to visit the homeland with government sponsored groups. I am not an activist, and I have a foreign passport. Maybe I can go back if I really want to. However, when I told them about my parents, who are now serving long prison terms for no reason, they stopped contacting me. I ask myself: do I have a family left to return to?

Another person had a similar experience and did not wish to risk going to Xinjiang:

Someone close to the Chinese consulate approached me and suggested that I should visit my family in the homeland. He aimed at “brainwashing” me, saying that it would be all right to go, and they can guarantee my safe return. However, I know people who went back and were terrified of the situation in the homeland. Publicly they would not say anything negative about their experiences, as they were told not to do so by the government, but in private, at least three people have told me that they were interrogated when they went back and forced to sign some papers. They said they would never go back again. I’m not planning to go.

Many Uyghurs who have been searching for relatives detained or forcibly disappeared during the Strike Hard Campaign say they still have no news from their family. They expressed concerns that the Chinese government’s efforts to promote an image of normalcy in Xinjiang have an adverse effect on the diaspora:

People who have proved themselves loyal to the Chinese government are getting these “privileged” visits. Political participation is decreasing as more people now have expectations to go back, and so they stay out of “trouble” and follow what the government says.

A person who was reunited with their family during a short visit said:

It was unbelievable. I could not believe [reuniting with family members] happened. It seemed impossible. At the same time, I felt extremely sad, remembering my friends who don’t even have contact with their families. How could I act as if nothing happened during the last seven years?

Crimes Against Humanity in Xinjiang

The Chinese government has for several years committed severe repression in Xinjiang that amounts to crimes against humanity, apparently to force assimilate Uyghurs to the mainstream Han Chinese culture. Abuses committed against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims include mass arbitrary detention and imprisonment, torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, separation of families, forced labor, sexual violence, and violations of reproductive rights. Chinese authorities have subjected Uyghurs abroad to various forms of [transnational repression](#). Since 2016, the authorities in Xinjiang have made foreign ties a punishable offense. Uyghurs who have been to one of the “[26 sensitive countries](#),” which include mainly Muslim-majority countries such as Kazakhstan, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia,

have family there, or otherwise communicate with the people there, have been interrogated, detained, and in many cases prosecuted and imprisoned.

Chinese and International Law

China's Exit and Entry Administration Law in article 12(5) broadly states that citizens who "may endanger national security or interests" can be prohibited from leaving the country. Similarly, the Passport Law in article 13 allows the authorities to deny passports to those whose departure is broadly considered to "cause harm to national security or cause significant losses to national interests."

The right to freedom of movement is recognized under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is considered reflective of customary international law, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which China is a signatory. Under article 12 of the ICCPR, "[e]veryone shall be free to leave any country, including his own."

The United Nations Human Rights Committee, in its General Comment on the Right to Freedom of Movement, stated that "[s]ince international travel usually requires appropriate documents, in particular a passport, the right to leave a country must include the right to obtain the necessary travel documents." Governments may only limit freedom of movement where "provided by law" and where necessary "to protect national security, public order, public health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others."

Such restrictions must be non-discriminatory, necessary to achieve one or more legitimate aims, proportionate in relation to the aim sought, and must be the least restrictive measure possible to achieve such aims. Restrictions invoking lawful aims must be specific about how, for example, national security would be threatened if the people prohibited from leaving were allowed to leave.

Current practices in Xinjiang violate Uyghurs' right to leave the country because they are arbitrary and discriminatory.