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2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: China: Xinjiang

Executive Summary

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This separate section on Xinjiang is included given the scope and severity of reported religious freedom violations specific to the region this year.

Multiple media and NGOs estimated the government detained at least 800,000 and up to possibly more than 2 million Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and members of other Muslim groups, mostly Chinese citizens, in specially built or converted detention facilities in Xinjiang and subjected them to forced disappearance, torture, physical abuse, and prolonged detention without trial because of their religion and ethnicity since April 2017. There were reports of deaths among detainees. Authorities maintained extensive and invasive security and surveillance, in part to gain information regarding individuals' religious adherence and practices. The government continued to cite concerns over the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” as grounds to enact and enforce restrictions on religious practices of Muslims in Xinjiang. The reported intensification of detentions accompanied authorities' implementation of a Xinjiang counterextremism regulation, enacted in March 2017, which identified many of the behaviors deemed “extremist,” as well as continued implementation of the National Counterterrorism Law, revised during 2018, which addressed “religious extremism.” In October the Standing Committee of the 12th People's Congress in Xinjiang revised its regulation to insert guidance on “vocational skill education training centers.” Authorities in Xinjiang punished schoolchildren, university students, and their family members for praying and barred youths from participating in

religious activities, including fasting, during Ramadan. The government sought the forcible repatriation of Uighur Muslims from foreign countries and detained some of those who returned.

Uighur Muslims reported severe societal discrimination in employment and business opportunities. In Xinjiang, tension between Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese continued.

Embassy officials met with government officials regarding the treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. According to a statement issued at the July 24-26 U.S. government-hosted Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, “We are particularly troubled by reports of the Chinese government’s deepening crackdown on Uighurs and members of other Muslim minority groups... [including] the detention of hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, in facilities ranging from makeshift holding centers to prisons, ostensibly for political re-education,” in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. There are reports of deaths in these facilities. We call on the Chinese government to release immediately all those arbitrarily detained.” On September 21, the Secretary of State said, “Uighurs are held against their will in so-called reeducation camps where they’re forced to endure severe political indoctrination and other awful abuses. Their religious beliefs are decimated.” On December 21, in discussing why China remained a Country of Particular Concern, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom said what is happening to Muslim Uighurs is one of the “worst human rights situations in the world.” In October the then U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations said, “In China, the government is engaged in the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities that is straight out of George Orwell.” She added, “It is the largest internment of civilians in the world today” and “It may be the largest since World War II.”

Section I. Religious Demography

A 2015 report on Xinjiang issued by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) states Uighur, Kazakh, Hui, Kyrgyz, and members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities constitute approximately 14.2 million residents in Xinjiang, or 61 percent of the total Xinjiang population. Uighur Muslims live primarily in Xinjiang.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution of the People’s Republic of China states citizens enjoy “freedom of religious belief,” but limits protections for religious practice to “normal religious activities” without defining “normal.” The constitution also stipulates the right of citizens to believe in or not believe in any religion. Only religious groups belonging to one of five state-sanctioned “patriotic religious associations” (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant), however, are permitted to register with the government and legally hold worship services or other religious ceremonies and activities.

Xinjiang has its own counterterrorism law containing similar provisions regarding “religious extremism” as the national law. The law bans the wearing of long beards, full-face coverings, expanding halal practice beyond food, and “interfering” with family planning, weddings, funerals, or inheritance, among other provisions.

In November SCIO published a report on cultural protection and development in Xinjiang that said the government promotes the use of standard Chinese language by law, issues religious texts published and distributed according to the law, and provides “important legal protection for the diverse cultural heritage of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang.”

In October the Xinjiang regional government issued implementing regulations for the counterterrorism law to permit the establishment of “vocational skill education training centers” (which the government also calls “education centers” and “education and transformation establishments”) to “carry out anti-extremist ideological education.” The revised regulations stipulate, “Institutions such as vocational skill education training centers should carry out training sessions on the common national language, laws and regulations, and vocational skills, and carry out anti-extremist ideological education, and psychological and behavioral correction to promote thought transformation of trainees, and help them return to the society and family.”

On October 9, The Standing Committee of the 13th People’s Congress of Xinjiang announced that the regional government maintains the right to uphold the basic principles of the party’s religious work, adhere to the rule of law, and actively guide religion to adapt to the socialist society. It states, “The judicial administrative department shall organize, guide, and coordinate the propaganda work of relevant laws and regulations, strengthen prison management, prevent the spread of extremism in prisons, and do relevant remolding, education, and transformation.”

Regulations in Urumqi, Xinjiang, prohibit veils that cover the face, homeschooling children, and “abnormal beards.” A separate regulation approved by the Xinjiang People’s Congress Standing Committee in 2016 bans the practice of religion in government buildings and the wearing of clothes associated with “religious extremism.”

Authorities in Xinjiang have defined 26 religious activities, including some practices of Islam, Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism, as illegal without government authorization. These regulations stipulate that no classes, scripture study groups, or religious studies courses may be offered by any group or institution without prior government approval. No religious group is permitted to carry out any religious activities, including preaching, missionary work, proselytizing, and ordaining clergy, without government approval. It also bans editing, translation, publication, printing, reproduction, production, distribution, sale, and dissemination of religious publications and audiovisual products without authorization.

Xinjiang officials require minors to complete nine years of compulsory education before they may receive religious education outside of school. Xinjiang regulations also forbid minors from participating in religious activities and impose penalties on organizations and individuals who “organize, entice, or force” minors to participate in religious

activities. According to press reports, a regulation in effect since 2016 further bans any form of religious activity in Xinjiang schools and stipulates parents or guardians who “organize, lure, or force minors into religious activities” may be stopped by anyone and reported to police. Xinjiang’s regional version of the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency Law states children affected by ethnic separatism, extremism and terrorism, and/or committing offenses that seriously endanger the society but do not constitute a criminal punishment may be sent to “specialized schools for correction” at the request of their parents, guardians or school. Xinjiang authorities continued to ban giving children any name with an Islamic connotation.

Government Practices

According to media and NGO reports, since April 2017 the government in Xinjiang continued to cite concerns over the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” as reasons to have detained an estimated 800,000 to two million Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and members of other majority Muslim groups, mostly Chinese citizens, in prison-like conditions. According to a July ChinaAid article, Christians were also detained in the same facilities. There were reports of deaths in detention and disappearances. The government targeted individuals for detention based primarily on their ethnic and religious identities, and detainees were reportedly subjected to forms of torture or cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment, including sexual abuse. Police raids and the government’s restrictions on Islamic practices as part of “strike hard” campaigns, which began in 2014, continued throughout the year. Local observers said, however, many incidents related to abuses or pressure on Uighurs went unreported to international media or NGOs.

According to Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), two Uighur religious scholars, Muhammad Salih Hajim and Abdulnehed Mehsum, died in detention camps. Authorities detained Hajim in late 2017, along with several members of his family, and in January UHRP learned of his death. UHRP reported that Mehsum died while in detention in Hotan in November 2017, but his death was not made public until May.

In August *The Guardian* reported local sources told a reporter that a Uighur named Karim had been jailed and “died after prolonged heavy labor.” He had lived in Muslim-majority countries and owned a Uighur restaurant in a major Chinese city.

On November 28, Mihrigul Tursun, said that while in detention, she saw nine women of the 68 who shared a cell with her die over the course of 3 months.

There were also reports of suicides. A Uighur advocacy group reported that more than 10 Uighur women committed suicide during the year in direct response to pressure or abuses by authorities. Reportedly, officials came to their homes and said either the women had to marry a Han Chinese man or the officials would take their parents into detention. To prevent this, the women committed suicide.

The New York Times, Radio Free Asia, and UHRP reported on the disappearance of several Uighur academics and university administrators during the year. A report released by UHRP in October identified 231 Uighur intellectuals authorities had caused to disappear, removed from their post, imprisoned, or sent to detention facilities.

In October UHRP said Uighur literature professors Abdukerim Rahman, Azat Sultan, and Gheyretjan Osman, language professor Arslan Abdulla, and poet Abdulqadir Jalaledin had disappeared and were believed to be held in detention facilities.

Radio Free Asia reported in September that two Kashgar University administrators (Erkin Omer, Muhter Abdughopur) and two professors (Qurban Osman and Gulnar Obul) had been removed from their positions and their whereabouts were unknown.

International media reported former president of Xinjiang University Tashpolat Tiyp and former president of Xinjiang Medical University Hospital Halmurat Ghopur separately received two-year suspended death sentences.

In August *The New York Times* reported Uighur academic Rahile Dawut, from Xinjiang, who had lectured and written extensively on Uighur culture, disappeared sometime after telling a relative of her intent to travel to Beijing from Urumqi in late 2017. Her family and friends said she was secretly detained as part of the government’s crackdown on Uighurs.

In March Toronto’s *The Globe and Mail* interviewed Nurgul Sawut, a clinical social worker in Canberra who said at least 12 of her family members disappeared in Xinjiang since the beginning of the year. Sawut also stated 54 relatives and close friends in Xinjiang of one couple in Australia had disappeared and were presumably in detention facilities. The article said more than 30 members of the family of Rebiya Kadeer, an activist and former president of the World Uyghur Congress, vanished or were being detained. Gulchehra Hoja, a broadcaster with the Uighur service of Radio Free Asia, stated that more than 20 of her relatives were missing and the government was responsible. The article also reported that Adalet Rahim of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada, said a brother and six cousins were in forced indoctrination programs. Her father, Abdulaziz Sattar, said some 50 of his relatives – among them bureaucrats, teachers, and a medical doctor – had been incarcerated in Xinjiang.

Associated Press reported the continued disappearance of 16-year-old Uighur Pakzat Qurban, who arrived at the Urumqi airport from Istanbul on his way to visit his grandmother in 2016.

There were numerous reports of authorities subjecting detained individuals to torture and other physical abuse.

In October ChinaAid reported first-hand accounts of a three-part system to which Uighurs were subjected in several detention facilities. According to local residents, each camp consists of areas A, B, and C. Guards first placed “newcomers and Muslims” in C, the worst area, where guards deprived them of food or water for 24 hours. Guards shackled their hands and feet, beat them, and screamed insults at them until they

repeatedly thanked the CCP and President Xi Jinping. Then the guards transferred them to area B, where they ate poor quality food and were permitted to use the bathroom. They went outside for 15 minutes every day to sing the national anthem. Guards then moved those considered successfully re-educated in Communist Party beliefs to area A, where the conditions were better.

The September Human Rights Watch (HRW) report titled *Eradicating Ideological Viruses* contained an account from a detention center in Xinjiang where detainees described interrogations and torture, including beatings, staff hanging detainees from ceilings and walls, and prolonged shackling. Detainees also reported being kept in spaces so overcrowded there was no room for all to sleep. One detainee said fellow detainees feared torture when being removed from their cells for interrogations, and one showed him scars after guards hanged the detainee from the ceiling. After being left hanging for a night, he said he would agree to anything. One individual said guards chained him to a bed so at most he could only sit and stand in one place. Guards told him that they would treat detainees the same way that they treat murderers. They also said there was a Xinjiang-wide order that all Uighurs and ethnic Kazakhs would have their feet shackled and their hands chained together with just five to six “rings” apart, making movement very difficult.

In May ChinaAid reported an 87-year-old ethnic Kazakh man said he was tortured in a Uighur detention facility in Xinjiang. He said authorities blasted noise from a high-pitched speaker, causing many inmates to slip into comas. He also said authorities forced Muslims to drink poor quality alcohol and eat pork, practices against their religious beliefs. Another ethnic Kazakh with knowledge of the situation said prison officials forced detainees to wear a special helmet that played noise for 21 hours per day, causing many to suffer mental breakdowns.

In September *The Guardian* reported that Kairat Samarkand, an ethnic Kazakh Muslim who had been detained outside Karamagay for nearly four months, said he was forced to wear an outfit of “iron clothes” that consisted of claws and rods that left him immobile with his hands and legs outstretched. He said guards forced him to wear it for 12 hours one day after he refused to make his bed. According to Samarkand, guards told him that there is no religion, and that the government and the party would take care of him. Samarkand told *The Washington Post* that guards in detention facilities would handcuff and ankle cuff detainees who disobeyed rules for up to 12 hours, and would subject detainees to waterboarding.

In July ChinaAid reported guards forced a woman in a detention facility to take unknown medication and her hair fell out. The woman said prison authorities handcuffed detainees and made them wear 44 pounds of armor for three-12 hours per day. Guards also shaved off Uighur women’s hair, which some of the women considered sacred. Helatti Shamarkhan, a former inmate, said he saw detainees being forcibly vaccinated and medicated.

In September HRW reported that a former detainee said authorities put him in a small solitary confinement cell measuring approximately 2 by 2 meters (43 square feet). They did not give the detainee any food or drink, handcuffed him in the back, and forced him to stand for 24 hours without sleep.

NGOs and international media reported arrests and detentions of Muslims in Xinjiang for “untrustworthy behavior” such as attending religious education courses, possessing books about religion and Uighur culture, wearing clothing with Islamic symbols, and traveling to certain counties. There were also reports of authorities holding children in orphanages after their parents were taken to internment camps.

The Economist reported authorities in Xinjiang used detailed information to rank citizens’ “trustworthiness” using various criteria. Officials deemed people as trustworthy, average, or untrustworthy depending on how they fit into the following categories: were 15 to 55 years old (i.e., of military age); were Uighur; were unemployed; had religious knowledge; prayed five times a day; had a passport; had visited one of 26 countries; had ever overstayed a visa; had family members in a foreign country (there are at least 10,000 Uighurs in Turkey); and home schooled their children. *The Economist* said “...the catalogue is explicitly racist: people are suspected merely on account of their ethnicity.” Being labelled “untrustworthy” could lead to being detained by authorities. HRW reported the 26 “sensitive countries” were Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Libya, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Thailand, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, and Yemen.

International media reported the government issued guidelines warning officials to look out for 75 “signs” or behaviors that signified religious extremism. These guidelines included growing a beard, praying in public outside of mosques, and abstaining from smoking or drinking alcohol. Radio Free Asia reported in November that government authorities in Hotan, Xinjiang, were using an expanded set of guidelines that included additional behaviors, such as how people stood during prayer and dying hair red with henna. According to another source, authorities considered red hair a sign of affiliation with extremist religious groups because some individuals say the Prophet Mohammad had red hair. Radio Free Asia reported that officials threatened individuals who did not comply with the list of proscribed behaviors with detention. Authorities also pressured students to report information on their family’s religious practices to their teachers, who would then pass the information to security officials.

In July the NGO China Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) published a report saying that, based on Chinese government data, criminal arrests in Xinjiang accounted for 21 percent of all arrests in China in 2017, while the population of Xinjiang comprised less than 2 percent of China’s overall population. CHRD reported the ratio of arrests in Xinjiang increased by more than 300 percent during the 2013-2017 period compared with 5 percent in preceding years. CHRD reported that, although the government does not provide an ethnic breakdown of the arrests, “...criminal punishment would disproportionately target the Uyghur Muslim group based on their percentage of the population.”

On July 25, CHRD reported officials in a Xinjiang village detained the local imam and forced him to provide his students’ names. Soon thereafter, authorities detained a carpenter in the village because he had attended Quranic studies classes 10 years previously.

On September 8, the *New York Times* reported that Abdusalam Muhemet said police in Xinjiang detained him for reciting a verse of the Quran at a funeral. Xinjiang residents said authorities detained people for visiting relatives abroad, possessing books about religion and Uighur culture, and even for wearing a T-shirt with a Muslim crescent. The article said the goal of these actions was to remove any devotion to Islam.

HRW reported a witness said he knew “three restaurant owners ... [who] ran ‘Islamic’ restaurants – they got detained because they don’t allow smoking or drinking in their restaurants.... [The authorities] are banning everything Islamic.” A former detainee stated that authorities in the detention centers did not allow people to say “*as-salaam alaikum*,” a religious greeting, but instead forced them to speak Mandarin only. The detainee also stated that if he used Turkic language words, officials would punish him.

In September *The Associated Press* reported Gulzar Seley and her infant son, Uighurs who lived in Istanbul and returned to Xinjiang to visit family, were imprisoned. According to Seley’s husband, who remained behind in Istanbul, authorities detained Seley shortly after she arrived at the airport in Urumqi and took her to her hometown, Karamay. Upon being released for a short period, she called her husband in Istanbul to tell him she and her son would not be coming back because she did not have time. She then disappeared, but her husband said he later learned she and their son were in jail.

According to *The Guardian*, in June police in Urumqi sentenced Guli, an ethnic Kazakh woman from Kazakhstan, to 15 days detention for not having her identification with her. Local authorities had previously interrogated her, citing reports that she wore a hijab and prayed. Guli described her detention facility as a long, single-story building that held approximately 230 women. She said inside the detention center, guards forced women to sing patriotic songs for two hours on most days, memorize a 10-point disciplinary code, and undergo self-criticism sessions. One woman told Guli she was there because police had found a “happy Eid” message on her phone. Authorities released Guli after eight days and sent her back to Kazakhstan.

Under a policy launched in 2017, authorities in Xinjiang built “welfare centers” aimed at providing orphans with state-sponsored care until they turn 18. According to a July *Financial Times* report, a former teacher in detention facilities said detainees’ children were sent to “welfare centers” as they were forbidden to attend school with “normal” children because their parents had political problems. The same article said public tenders issued by local governments since 2017 indicated “dozens” of orphanages were being built. One county in Kashgar built 18 new orphanages in 2017 alone, according to local media.

Radio Free Asia reported in July and September that authorities placed children whose parents were in detention facilities in “Little Angel Schools.” The reports described the schools as surrounded by walls topped with barbed wire. Reports on the ages of

children held varied, and some said children from six months to 14 years were being held, and were not allowed to go out due to security concerns. Reportedly, one worker at a regional orphanage in southern Xinjiang told Radio Free Asia his facility was seriously overcrowded with children “locked up like farm animals in a shed.” He said, with the overcrowding, authorities “are moving children to mainland China,” although he was unsure of where they were being sent. He added that “it isn’t possible” for parents released from detention to look for their children in orphanages. The CCP Secretary for Hotan Prefecture’s Keriye County said approximately 2,500 children were being held in two newly constructed buildings. International media and NGOs reported the government restricted individuals’ ability to engage in religious practices and forced Muslims in Xinjiang to perform activities inconsistent with their religious beliefs.

The New York Times reported in September that officials in Hotan set very narrow limits on the practice of Islam, including a prohibition on praying at home if there were friends or guests present. Residents said police sometimes searched homes for forbidden books and items such as prayer mats, using special equipment to check walls and floors for hidden caches.

ChinaAid reported that on February 17, authorities in Yili, Xinjiang, ordered Uighurs and ethnic Kazakhs to destroy the Islamic star and crescent symbol on all gravesites. Otherwise, authorities would forcibly demolish the graves.

Bitter Winter, an online magazine on religious liberty and human rights in China, reported government officials monitored funeral services in Xinjiang and prohibited Muslims from commemorating their dead according to their faith traditions. In February armed police officers detain Ezimet, a Uighur CCP member from Kashgar City, for performing an Islamic funeral prayer at his mother’s burial ceremony several years previously. As of year’s end, Ezimet remained in custody in an undisclosed location. Authorities also implicated his wife and child, and forced them to study government policy.

Radio Free Asia reported in June that authorities in Xinjiang affiliated with the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps were building nine “burial management centers,” which included crematoria, in areas with high Uighur populations. Members of the Uighur exile community said authorities were using the centers to remove the religious context from funerary rites. According to the article, other members of the exile community said “authorities use the crematoria to secretly ‘deal with’ the bodies of Uyghurs who have been killed by security forces during protests against ... religious repression... or who have died under questionable circumstances in re-education camps.” The article cited a source who said “very few” ethnic corpses brought to his crematorium in Kuchar (Kuche) county came from the “re-education camps.” The source said the corpses of ethnic minorities brought to his crematorium are “normally brought to us with special documentation provided by police.”

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to deny international media reports stating authorities banned Uighur Muslims from Ramadan fasting, and said the constitution provided for religious freedom for Uighurs. Reports published on the official websites of local governments in Xinjiang, however, indicated authorities restricted or banned

certain groups of Uighurs from observing Ramadan, including CCP members, their relatives, students, and employees of state-owned enterprises and state-run organizations, and instead hosted education events about the dangers of “religious extremism.” Authorities also hosted morning sessions in order to ensure students and workers ate breakfast. According to *The Independent*, authorities required mandatory 24-hour shifts for local government employees, and mandatory sports activities and patriotic film sessions for students on Fridays throughout the month. Authorities ordered restaurants and grocery stores to remain open and serve alcohol during Ramadan, according to the website of the Qapqal County, Yili (Ili) Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture government.

There were reports of authorities prohibiting students from the middle school level through to the university level from fasting during Ramadan.

According to Radio Free Asia, authorities required all Uighur cadres, civil servants, and pensioners to sign a pledge stating they would not fast and would seek to dissuade their families and friends from doing so.

The government facilitated participation in the Hajj, and Muslims applied online or through local official Islamic associations. Media reported authorities punished pilgrims attempting to perform the Hajj through routes other than government-arranged options. According to an official media report in *Global Times*, approximately 11,500 Chinese Muslims were expected to make the Hajj pilgrimage during the year, compared to 12,800 in 2017. Approximately 3,300 of them were to receive GPS tracking devices as part of a pilot program allowing the IAC to monitor their location in real time throughout the pilgrimage. According to the manufacturer, SARA and IAC jointly designed the device. In 2016 IAC reported that Saudi Arabia imposed an annual quota on the number of pilgrims from China that was lower than those for other countries. State media said Xinjiang provided nearly a quarter of pilgrims, although independent sources say only 1,400 Uighur Muslims were able to participate. These figures included IAC members and security officials sent to monitor Muslim citizens and prevent unauthorized activities. Uighur Muslims reported difficulties taking part in state-sanctioned Hajj travel due to IAC’s criteria for participation in the official Hajj program. The government confiscated the passports of Uighurs in Xinjiang, and Uighurs reported near universal failure in efforts to regain possession of travel documents. Age restrictions limiting Hajj travel to Uighurs over 60 years old also reduced the number traveling to Mecca, according to media reports. Those selected to perform state-sanctioned Hajj travel were required to undergo political and religious “education,” according to SARA and media reports. Uighurs allowed to attend the Hajj were also reportedly forced to participate in political education every day during the Hajj. Organizations reported the government favored Hui Muslims over Uighur Muslims in the Hajj application process. Muslims that chose to travel outside of legal government channels reportedly often risked deportation when they tried to travel through third countries.

In September HRW reported authorities began requiring everyone in a village in Xinjiang to gather for a weekly Chinese flag-raising ceremony. On one occasion, police hit an elderly woman, telling her to take off her headscarf. Authorities confiscated prayer mats and copies of the Quran. Village authorities prohibited children from learning about religion, even at home.

In February ChinaAid reported that officials forced Muslims in Xinjiang to take part in traditional methods of celebration for the Chinese Lunar New Year, despite conflicts with Islam. According to an ethnic Kazakh man, authorities forced ethnic Kazakhs and Uighurs in Xinjiang to eat pork dumplings – a violation of Islamic dietary restrictions. If they refused, public security staff detained them on the spot.

Authorities continued to prevent any “illegal” religious activities in Xinjiang and prioritize Chinese language and culture over Uighur language and culture under the rubric of ethnic unity. Authorities promoted loyalty to the Communist Party as the most important value. Reportedly, authorities encouraged thousands of Uighurs to participate against their will in ceremonies wearing traditional Han Chinese clothing, performing tai chi, and singing the national anthem. HRW reported in September that in Xinjiang, officials required individuals to attend political indoctrination meetings and, for some, Mandarin classes.

On December 12, the SCIO issued a report on what it said was the progress of human rights over 40 years. The report said the state offered training sessions to clerics on interpreting scriptures and, since 2011, the National Religious Affairs Administration had trained several hundred Islamic clerics from Xinjiang. The central government supported the Xinjiang Islamic Institute.

Authorities in Xinjiang maintained extensive and invasive security and surveillance, reportedly in part to gain information regarding individuals’ religious adherence and practices.

HRW reported the government required all individuals in Xinjiang to have a spyware app on their mobile phone because the government considered “web cleansing” necessary to prevent access to terrorist information. Failing to install the app, which could identify whom people called, track online activity, and record social media use, was deemed an offense. The report stated that “Wi-Fi sniffers” in public places monitored all networked devices in range.

The People’s High Court, Public Security Bureau, Bureau of Culture, and Bureau of Industry and Commerce in Xinjiang continued to implement restrictions on video and audio recordings the government defined as promoting terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism. Authorities prohibited dissemination of such materials on the internet, social media, and in online marketplaces. As part of these measures, police randomly stopped individuals to check their mobile phones for sensitive content.

In September HRW stated that in Xinjiang, officials used questionnaires to examine people’s everyday behavior, inputting the results into a large-scale data analysis program. According to HRW, any indications of religious piety, along with “storing

lots of food in one’s home” or owning fitness equipment, could be construed as signs of “extremism.” HRW said the government’s religious restrictions had become so stringent that it had “effectively outlawed the practice of Islam.”

At the end of December 2017, HRW reported a continuing effort of authorities in Xinjiang to collect DNA samples, fingerprints, iris scans, and blood types of all residents in the region between the ages of 12 and 65. This campaign significantly expanded authorities’ collection of biometric data beyond previous government efforts in the region, which were limited to biometric information from passport applicants.

According to *The New York Times*, authorities collected DNA samples, face-scans, voice recordings, and fingerprints of individuals in Xinjiang after saying they were receiving a free health check, but authorities refused to provide the results of the “check.” In patent applications filed in 2013 and 2017, government researchers said they took genetic material from Uighurs and compared it with DNA from other ethnic groups, and were able to sort people by ethnicity. Human rights groups and Uighur activists said collecting genetic material was a key part of the government’s campaign in Xinjiang. They said the government would compile the information into a comprehensive DNA database used to track any Uighurs who resisted conforming to the government’s wishes.

According to an HRW report released in September, an individual who spent months in detention facilities in Xinjiang said in May that guards watched the inmates through video cameras, forcing everyone to remain still until a voice came from the speakers telling detainees they could relax for a few minutes. Guards also watched when inmates went to the bathroom. The same report detailed how the government extended surveillance to life outside the camps. A woman who left Xinjiang in 2017 told HRW that five officials took turns watching over her at home, documenting that they had checked on her. According to the report, the government officials appeared in photographs reading political propaganda together and preparing a bed to stay overnight. The report said having male cadres stay overnight in homes with female inhabitants caused women and girls to be vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Throughout Ramadan, authorities in Hotan Prefecture assigned party cadres to stay in local residences. They observed families throughout the day and ensured they did not pray or fast. According to Radio Free Asia, an official said “During this period, [officials] will get to know the lives of the people, assist in their daily activities – such as farming – and propagate laws and regulations, party and government ethnic and religious policies, and so on.”

In May CNN reported that authorities had dispatched more than one million Communist officials from other parts of the country to live with local families in Xinjiang. The report stated the government instituted these home stays to target farmer households in southern Xinjiang, where authorities have been waging what the report called an unrelenting campaign against the forces of “terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.” The report also stated the government required families to

provide detailed information on their personal lives and political views during the officials’ visits. Authorities also subjected families to political education from the live-in officials – whom the government had mandated to stay at least one week per month in some locations. The program started in 2014, according to CNN.

A local Xinjiang government statement online indicated officials had to inspect the homes in which they were staying for any religious elements or logos and instructed the officials to confiscate any such items they found.

On August 8, *The New York Times* reported that, in addition to the mass detentions in Xinjiang, authorities intensified the use of informers and expanded police surveillance, including installing cameras in some people’s homes.

In May *The Economist* reported that in Hotan, Xinjiang, there were police stations approximately every 300 meters (1000 feet). The article stated that the government referred to the stations as “convenience police stations.” The stations were part of a grid-management system similar to those Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo started when he was Party Secretary in Tibet from 2011 to 2016. In Xinjiang authorities divided each city into squares, with approximately 500 people in each square. Every square had a police station that monitored the inhabitants. The report adds that every village in Xinjiang had a similar type of “convenience police station.”

The same report detailed police activities at a large checkpoint on the edge of Hotan, where a police officer ordered all the passengers off the bus. The passengers (all Uighur) took turns in a booth, where officials scanned identity cards, took photographs and fingerprints, used newly installed iris-recognition technology, and forced women to take off their headscarves. The officials also forced young Uighurs to give authorities access to their phones in order to download their smart phone contents for later analysis.

The government restricted access to houses of worship. *The Economist* reported in May that in Hotan authorities closed neighborhood mosques, leaving a handful of large mosques open. The account stated that police forced worshippers to register with them before attending mosques. At the entrance to the largest mosque in Kashgar, the Idh Kha – a famous place of pilgrimage – two policemen sat underneath a banner saying “Love the party, love the country.” Inside, a member of the mosque’s staff held classes for local traders on how to be a good Communist. In Urumqi, the article stated that authorities knocked down minarets and Islamic crescents on the mosques that were permitted to remain open. Other reports said restrictions across Xinjiang that required worshippers to apply for mosque entry permits remained in place. According to a local source, authorities banned individuals under the age of 20 from attending religious services in mosques.

The government reportedly moved against human rights activists. Radio Free Asia reported that on August 16, police threatened prominent Hui Muslim poet Cui Haoxin (whose pen name is An Ran), after he tweeted about the mass incarceration of Uighurs in internment camps. According to Cui, five police officers raided his home and warned

him not to use social media. Authorities had previously sent Cui to a weeklong re-education course in eastern China and briefly detained him in connection with his poetry and writings that referenced Xinjiang.

The government also reportedly restricted travel and sought to intimidate or forcibly repatriate Uighur and other Muslims abroad.

According to an HRW September report, individuals had to apply to the police for permission and proceed through numerous checkpoints to go from one town to the next in Xinjiang. HRW also reported that authorities recalled passports from people in the region and prohibited communication with individuals outside the country, including relatives. Ethnoreligious minorities also reported increased screening at airport, train station, and roadside security checkpoints.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported in August that Chinese security officials told Uighurs living abroad to collect information on other Uighurs. Several Uighurs abroad reported the government denying their passport renewals and instead offering a one-way travel document back to China. Several individuals also reported authorities threatened to put family members of Uighurs living abroad into detention centers if they did not return.

HRW reported that in September an officer called an ethnic Turkic Muslim living in the United States and told him to return to China, threatening to abduct him if he refused. It may not be now, the officer said, “but this is just a matter of time.”

HRW reported in June that Chinese authorities contacted Murat, a 37-year-old student living outside the country whose sister was in a detention facility in China, telling her that even though she was in a foreign country, they could “manage” her. Murat stated that she did not join any terrorist organization or any organization against China or join any demonstrations.

According to a *Business Insider* report from August the government began compiling a database of its Muslim citizens living abroad. The article said authorities used intimidation tactics to obtain license plate numbers, bank details, and marriage certificate information from Uighur citizens in other countries.

In a March 28 article, *The Economist* cited reports issued by human rights groups saying authorities forced hundreds of Uighurs back to China in the past decade from Egypt, Thailand, Vietnam, and elsewhere. These groups said Chinese authorities in foreign countries had detained and interrogated individuals and several hundred were in foreign jails. Chinese officials often recruited local residents on both sides of the country’s southwestern borders and across Central Asia to report the arrival of “suspicious” individuals. *The Economist* report said the government frequently succeeded in having these individuals sent back without going through any official legal process.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because the government and individuals closely link religion, culture, and ethnicity, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of societal discrimination as being solely based on religious identity. Muslims in Xinjiang faced discrimination in hiring and retaining their positions.

In Xinjiang, policies discriminating against Uighurs, as well as greater access to economic opportunities for Han Chinese, exacerbated tensions between Uighur Muslims and both the Han Chinese and the government.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials routinely raised concerns the treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang with Chinese government officials. A statement issued to accompany the July 24-26 U.S. Government-hosted Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom said, “We are particularly troubled by reports of the Chinese government’s deepening crackdown on Uighurs and members of other Muslim minority groups...[including] the detention of hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions, in facilities ranging from makeshift holding centers to prisons, ostensibly for political re-education,” in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. There are reports of deaths in these facilities. We call on the Chinese government to release immediately all those arbitrarily detained.” On September 21, the Secretary of State said, “Uighurs are held against their will in so-called reeducation camps where they’re forced to endure severe political indoctrination and other awful abuses. Their religious beliefs are decimated.” On December 21, while explaining why China remained designated on the list of Countries of Particular Concern, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom said what is happening to Muslim Uighurs is one of the “worst human rights situations in the world.” At the October 15 Chiefs of Defense Conference Dinner in Washington, the then U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations said, “In China, the government is engaged in the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities that is straight out of George Orwell.” She added, “It is the largest internment of civilians in the world today” and “It may be the largest since World War II.”

The embassy and consulates general delivered direct messaging about religious freedom in Xinjiang through social media posts on Weibo and WeChat. In a series of April messages, the embassy posted the Department of State Spokesperson’s criticism of the arrest of Uighur journalists’ family members in Xinjiang, driving a surge of engagement with Chinese online users on the issue of religious repression in Xinjiang. In July the embassy promoted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington through social media posts advocating for religious freedom that stimulated online debate regarding the situation of Muslims in Xinjiang. The embassy and consulates general created messages for Ramadan and Eid featuring the Ambassador and Consuls General, and promoted Islamic holiday messages from the White House, the Secretary of State, and others. These messages sparked online engagement on the issue of religious freedom for Muslims, and, in particular, for Xinjiang’s ethnic minority Muslim populations. The embassy and consulates general created weekly social media content promoting tolerance for religious and ethnic diversity, generally by using examples from the United States to inspire discussion

about religious freedom in China, including Xinjiang. The embassy continued to draw attention to specific cases of repression in Xinjiang, and while government censors often blocked such posts on Weibo and WeChat, the discussion continued on Twitter. The embassy’s Twitter followers regularly engaged in open, Chinese-language discussions related to Xinjiang or that were critical of Chinese official positions.

Embassy and consulate general officials also engaged directly with Chinese audiences for discussions about religious freedom for Muslims. In July the embassy hosted a screening and discussion of a film about gender equality in Islamic society which explained the Islamic faith, the rituals of Ramadan, and wearing the hijab. In January a Guangzhou Consulate General officer spoke on freedom of religion, focusing on its role in ameliorating sources of terrorism, which led to an audience discussion about the role of Islam in China.

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