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2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: China - Xinjiang

Executive Summary

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

The U.S. government estimated the People’s Republic of China (PRC) government detained more than one million Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui, and members of other Muslim groups, as well as some Uighur Christians, in specially built internment camps or converted detention facilities in Xinjiang and subjected them to forced disappearance, political indoctrination, torture, psychological and physical and psychological abuse, including forced sterilization and sexual abuse, forced labor, and prolonged detention without trial because of their religion and ethnicity. Many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) estimated the number being interred was higher. The whereabouts of hundreds of prominent Uighur intellectuals, doctors, journalists, artists, academics, and other professionals, in addition to many other citizens, who were arrested or detained remained unknown. There were reports of individuals dying as a result of injuries sustained during interrogations. In November the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and *The New York Times* reported on leaked internal PRC documents that describing the government’s mass internment and surveillance programs, including a manual for operating internment camps with instructions on how to prevent escapes, how to maintain total secrecy about the camps’ existence, and methods of forced indoctrination. A third document, the “Karakax List,” originally leaked in November and later made public, presented evidence the government initially interned or extended the internment of individuals on religious grounds in four reeducation centers in Karakax County, Hotan Prefecture. Media reported that in 2018 courts sentenced 143,000 individuals to prison or other punishments, compared with 87,000 in 2017. During the year, the government continued to restrict access to and destroyed or desecrated mosques and other religious sites. Authorities maintained extensive and invasive security and surveillance, in part to gain information regarding individuals’ religious adherence and practices. This surveillance included behavioral profiling, and forcing Uighurs to accept government officials and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) members living in their homes and to install mandatory mobile spyware applications on their phones. The government continued to cite what it called the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” as its justification to enact and enforce restrictions on

religious practices of Muslims and non-Muslim religious minorities. The government intensified use of detentions in furtherance of implementing a Xinjiang counterextremism regulation that identifies “extremist” behaviors (including growing beards, wearing headscarves, and abstaining from alcohol) and the National Counterterrorism Law, which addresses “religious extremism.” Authorities in Xinjiang punished individuals, including imams, for praying or studying the Quran, and donating to mosques; authorities demanded individuals remove religious symbols from their homes, and barred youths from participating in religious activities. Authorities barred many categories of persons from fasting, during Ramadan, including students, and considered observing the Ramadan fast and participating in the Hajj to be suspicious behavior. Satellite imagery and other sources indicated the government destroyed numerous mosques and other religious sites, and surveilled others. *The New York Times* reported that according to a 2017 policy document posted on the Ministry of Education’s website, nearly 40 percent of all elementary and middle school students – approximately half a million children – were separated from their families and placed in boarding schools where they studied ethnic Han culture, the Mandarin language, and CCP ideology. The government sought the forcible repatriation from foreign countries of Uighur and other Muslim citizens and detained some of those who returned. The government harassed, interrogated, and detained the family members of Uighur and other Muslim activists who criticized its treatment of religious and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

Uighur Muslims reported severe societal discrimination in employment and business opportunities. In Xinjiang, tension between Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese continued in parallel with the authorities’ suppression of Uighur language, culture, and religious practices while promoting the Han majority in political, economic, and cultural life.

At the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C. in July, the United States and other governments issued a statement on China that included the following: “We call for an end to China’s mass detentions and its repressive controls on the cultural and religious practices and identities of members of religious and ethnic minority groups.” In November the Secretary of State said, “We call on the Chinese government to immediately release all those who are arbitrarily detained and to end its draconian policies that have terrorized its own citizens in Xinjiang.” Embassy officials met with national government officials regarding the treatment of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. The embassy and consulates general delivered direct messaging about religious freedom in Xinjiang through social media posts, and promoted online engagement on the issue of religious freedom for Muslims, and, in particular, for Xinjiang’s ethnic minority Muslim populations. The embassy continued in its engagement with the PRC government to draw attention to specific cases of repression in Xinjiang.

Section I. Religious Demography

A 2015 report on Xinjiang issued by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) estimates the total population was 23.2 million in 2014. The report states Uighur, Kazakh, Hui, Kyrgyz, and members of other predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities

constitute approximately 14.6 million residents in Xinjiang, or 63 percent of the total Xinjiang population. The largest segment of the remaining population is Han Chinese, with additional groups including Mongols, Tibetans, and others. Uighur Muslims live primarily in Xinjiang. *The Globe and Mail* reported in September that according to sources in the region, Christians likely number in the thousands.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The national constitution 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. The government recognizes five official religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Only religious groups belonging to one of five state-sanctioned “patriotic religious associations” (the Buddhist Association of China, the Chinese Taoist Association, the Islamic Association of China, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association) representing these religions 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 to the national law regarding “religious extremism.” 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.

Regional regulations passed in 2018 to implement the national counterterrorism law 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 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.”

Regulations in Xinjiang’s capital Urumqi prohibit veils that cover the face, homeschooling children, and “abnormal beards.” A separate regulation bans the practice of religion in government buildings and the wearing of clothes associated with “religious extremism.” Similar regulations are in effect in other parts of Xinjiang.

Authorities in Xinjiang have defined 26 religious activities, including some practices of Islam, Christianity, and Tibetan Buddhism, as illegal without government authorization. Regional regulations stipulate 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.

Regional regulations also ban 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 warrant a criminal punishment may be sent to “specialized schools for correction” at the request of their parents, guardians, or school.

Government Practices

According to media and NGO reports, the central government and regional authorities in Xinjiang continued to cite what it called the “three evils” of “ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and violent terrorism” as its justification to enact and enforce restrictions on religious practices of Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Hui, and members of other Muslim and non-Muslim religious groups. Police raids and the government’s restrictions on Islamic practices as part of “strike hard” campaigns, the latest iteration of which began in 2014, continued throughout the year. Local observers said many incidents related to abuses or pressure on Uighurs and other Muslims went unreported to international media or NGOs due to government restrictions.

There were several reports of individuals dying as a result of abuse suffered during interrogation and detentions.

Radio Free Asia (RFA) reported in July that Uighur Alimjan Emet from Kashgar (Chinese: Kashi) Prefecture was beaten to death in an internment camp in Kashgar’s Yengixahar (Shule) County because he denied praying in secret. Emet had previously been fired from his job at a loan office in his home township of Ermudan for allegedly praying in secret. An official familiar with Emet’s death said he did not appear to suffer from any medical problems before authorities detained him at the internment camp.

RFA reported in June that in November 2018 Uighur Qaharjan Qawul, a chauffeur, became unconscious during an interrogation while detained in an internment camp in Aksu (Akesu) City and subsequently died, according to local officials and a Uighur exile group. Authorities arrested Qawul in 2017 and accused him of making phone calls to “blacklisted” families.

In June RFA reported that in June 2018 a Uighur woman, Aytursun Eli, died while being questioned in custody, according to an interview her mother gave to the official Xinjiang Women’s Federation that was obtained by the Washington-based International Uyghur

Human Rights and Democracy Foundation. According to Eli’s mother, Patigul Yasin, authorities took Eli, a tour director at Hua An Tourism Company in Kashgar Prefecture, into custody after she returned from a work trip to Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, a country to which the government does not allow Uighurs to travel. Following her daughter’s death, authorities insisted Eli had a heart condition which rendered her “unable to cope with being questioned.” Yasin denied that her daughter had a heart condition.

The New York Times, RFA, and the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) reported on the continued disappearance of hundreds of Uighur intellectuals, doctors, journalists, artists, academics, and university administrators. In May the UHRP issued a list of 435 “Uyghur and other Turkic intellectuals detained, imprisoned, or disappeared,” including students, university and secondary school instructors, media professionals such as journalists, medical professionals, and entertainers and performers. In January *The New York Times* reported, “The mass detention of some of China’s most accomplished Uighurs has become an alarming symbol of the Communist Party’s most intense social-engineering drive in decades, according to scholars, human rights advocates and exiled Uighurs...The Chinese government has described the detentions as a job training program aimed at providing employment opportunities for some of the country’s poorest people. But a list of more than 100 detained Uighur scholars compiled by exiles includes many prominent poets and writers, university heads and professors of everything from anthropology to Uighur history.”

In October Yusup Sulayman, a Uighur musician living in exile, told the *PBS Newshour*, “[The authorities] are disappearing our famous artists, composers, and songwriters before anyone else. They’re disappearing our intellectuals.” Sulayman said his extended family were being held in camps and he had not heard from any of them for more than two years. Sulayman said, “The absolute worst thing is that I don’t know if they are dead or alive. Our communication is completely cut off.”

In January RFA reported authorities sentenced Dina Eganbayurt, a prominent ethnic Kazakh artist and graduate of the Xinjiang Arts Institute, in a secret trial in April 2018 to three years’ imprisonment in an internment camp. Authorities did not notify her family of the charges against her, sources in the region said.

According to media reports and other sources, prominent Uighurs who remained in detention or whose whereabouts were unknown as of year’s end included: Rahile Dawut, an anthropologist at Xinjiang University who studied Islamic shrines, traditional songs, and folklore; Uighur literature professors Abdukerim Rahman, Azat Sultan, and Gheyretjan Osman; language professor Arslan Abdulla; poet Abdulqadir Jalaaladdin; Kashgar University administrators Erkin Omer and Muhter Abdughopur; Kashgar University professors Qurban Osman and Gulnar Obul; and Qurban Mamut, former editor in chief of Xinjiang Civilization, a CCP-controlled Uighur journal.

At year’s end the whereabouts and welfare of Tashpolat Tiyp, former president of Xinjiang University, remained unknown, following his disappearance in 2017. International media reported in 2018 that Tiyp had been sentenced to death, with the sentence suspended for two years. On September 10, Amnesty International wrote on

its website, “Fears are mounting that the Chinese authorities will imminently carry out the execution of Tashpolat Tiyp, a prominent Uyghur academic who was convicted in a secret and grossly unfair trial.” On December 26, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a statement stating that human rights experts “expressed alarm” about Tiyp’s situation. The statement quoted human rights experts as saying, “The experts reiterate their recommendation that information about his current place of detention be made public and that his family should be allowed to visit him.” It continued, “Incommunicado detention, enforced disappearances, and secret trials have no place in a country governed by the rule of law. The rule by law is not the rule of law. Such practices go against the spirit of the ICCPR, which China has signed in 1998[.]”

Authorities continued to disappear less high-profile individuals. In April RFA reported a relative of Ilyas Memet, a successful Uighur property developer and father of five, said Memet was arrested at his office in Ghulja (Yining) City in Ili Kazakh (Yili Hasake) Autonomous Prefecture in March 2018. The relative said it was unclear why authorities arrested him or whether he had been tried. Sources close to his family suggested Memet may have been arrested because he had visited several countries to which authorities banned Uighurs from traveling due to the perceived threat of religious extremism, including Turkey.

In November RFA reported that Ibrahim Kurban, a Uighur trader from Terim Township, Yopurgha (Yuepuhu) County, Kashgar Prefecture, disappeared in May 2016, just prior to taking a business trip to Turkey. Three years later, a friend learned he had died in custody. An officer in the Yopurgha County Police Department told RFA that sometime during that period Kurban was detained and interrogated, and that he had become sick and was taken to the hospital, where he died under police supervision.” The officer did not say why Kurban was taken into custody.

There were numerous reports of authorities subjecting detained individuals to severe physical abuse, including sexual abuse.

In October *The Independent* reported Sayragul Sauytbay, whom authorities detained in an internment camp in November 2017, said inmates were subjected to torture and medical experiments, and forced to eat pork. She said women in the camp were systematically raped by guards and that other women were forced to watch. Sauytbay said, “People who turned their head or closed their eyes, and those who looked angry or shocked, were taken away and we never saw them again.” Sauytbay said, “There were almost 20 people in a room of 16 square meters [172 square feet]...There were cameras in their rooms, too, and also in the corridor.”

In March *The Globe and Mail* reported Gulzira Auelhan, an ethnic Kazakh from Xinjiang who had been living in Kazakhstan, was arrested in 2017 while visiting her ill father. Auelhan said she was detained for 437 days, either under house arrest with relatives or in one of five different facilities, including a factory and a middle school converted into a center for political indoctrination and technical instruction. Auelhan said an official told her at the time of her arrest that she would be detained for 15 days and attend training classes, but she was held for more than 14 months and attended classes for only one

week during that time. During her detention, Auelhan was forced to work in a garment factory. She said during her detention authorities shocked her with a stun gun to the head for spending more than the allotted two minutes in the toilet, and handcuffed her for 24 hours because guards accused her of letting another woman participate in religious ablutions.

In October RFA reported women in detention camps were involuntarily sterilized. Female detainees reportedly were routinely forced to take medication affecting their reproductive cycles. During separate incidents of internment totaling nine months between April 2017 and December 2018, Tursunay Ziyawudun, a Uighur woman from Kunes (Xinyuan) County, in the Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture, said camp authorities regularly “took women to the hospital and operated on them so that they no longer could have children” or “forced them to take medicine.” Many women stopped menstruating. She said she was spared the procedure because she already had health complications. Ziyawudun also described torture: tying inmates to a metal chair during interrogations, cutting hair by first pulling it through the cell bars, shackling inmates, and denying food. She reported that guards denied inmates treatment for health problems.

In August *The Independent* reported Uighur Muslim women were being sterilized in internment camps, according to former detainees. “They injected us from time to time,” said Gulbahar Jalilova, a Uighur living in exile, who was held for more than a year in an internment camp. Jalilova said as of result of the injections women stopped menstruating. She said she spent most of her time with up to 50 persons in a cell measuring 10 feet by 20 feet (3 meters by 6 meters), adding “It’s like we were just piece [s] of meat.” *The Independent* also reported Mihrigul Tursun, a Uighur living in exile, told an audience at an Amnesty International event that she had been given unknown drugs and injections while being held in an internment camp in 2017. According to Tursun, doctors in the United States later told her she had been sterilized.

The U.S. government estimated the PRC government detained more than one million Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, ethnic Kyrgyz, Hui, and members of other Muslim groups in detention camps. Many NGOs estimated the number being interred was higher. *The Globe and Mail* reported in September that some Uighur Christians were also being held. In 2018 the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) analyzed 28 camps detaining Xinjiang residents. ASPI reported, “Estimates of the total number vary, but recent media reports have identified roughly 180 facilities and some estimates range as high as 1,200 across the region. Since early 2016 there has been a 465 percent growth in the size of the 28 camps identified in this report.” In November RFA reported that Adrian Zenz, a German researcher, estimated the number of camps may exceed 1,000. In October *PBS Newshour* broadcast a segment on Xinjiang that showed video of a camp under construction. The entrance to the building had an iron gate, the rooms looked like prison cells, and there were bars on the windows.

In April *The New York Times* reported an internment camp on the outskirts of Kashgar City occupied 639,764 square feet (195,000 square meters) with a capacity to hold approximately 20,000 individuals.

In October RFA reported that according to official sources in the Kuchar County Police Department, between June and December 2018 at least 150 persons died in No. 1 Internment Camp in the Yengisher District of the county seat, approximately 10 kilometers (six miles) from Kuchar City in Aksu (Akesu) Prefecture.

On November 16 and November 24, *The New York Times* reported on the leak of 403 pages of internal government and CCP documents describing the government’s mass internment program in Xinjiang; these leaked documents were later called “The Xinjiang Papers.” The documents included nearly 200 pages of speeches by Chairman Xi and other government officials, and more than 150 pages of directives and reports on the surveillance and control of the Uighur population in the region. The documents revealed that authorities set numeric targets for Uighur detentions in the region. There were also references to plans to extend restrictions on Muslims to other parts of the country. *The New York Times* was one of 17 media outlets to partner with the ICIJ regarding release of the leaked documents.

The leaked documents included speeches by Chairman Xi in which he called for strong action to eradicate what he called “radical Islam” in the region. In one speech he compared Islamic extremism to a virus and a dangerously addictive drug and said, referring to what he called Islamic extremists, “We must be as harsh as them and show absolutely no mercy.” *The New York Times* reported that before Xi’s presidency, the CCP often described attacks in Xinjiang as the work of a few fanatics inspired by foreign groups, but that Chairman Xi argued extremism had become commonplace in the region.

The leaked documents also included talking points for officials to use to respond to questions from students who had been sent to study in other parts of the country and returned home for summer break only to find that their families had been sent to internment camps. One prescribed response was to say their family members were in “a training school set up by the government,” and also, “I’m sure that you will support them, because this is for their own good, and also for your own good.” In response to requests for contact with their relatives, authorities were to tell the students, “If you want to see them, we can arrange for you to have a video meeting.” The talking points included increasingly firm responses if questions continued, including that the person’s relatives had been “infected” by the “virus” of Islamic radicalism and needed to be cured. If asked whether their relatives had committed a crime, the authorities were to respond, “It is just that their thinking has been infected by unhealthy thought.”

According to *The New York Times*, the documents revealed that authorities punished thousands of officials in Xinjiang for “resisting or failing to carry out the crackdown with sufficient zeal.” Ethnic Han official Wang Yongzhi, leader of the Yarkand County area, had built two large detention facilities, one as big as 50 basketball courts, and interned 20,000 persons in them. He sharply increased funding for security forces in 2017, doubling outlays for checkpoints and surveillance to renminbi (RMB) 1.37 billion (\$196 million); however, Wang also ordered the release of more than 7,000 camp inmates. According to one academic, Wang released the individuals not due to his conscience but because he was concerned about achieving economic development goals with so much of the labor force locked up. Later in 2017 authorities removed Wang from his position,

prosecuted him “for gravely disobeying the party central leadership’s strategy for governing Xinjiang,” and forced him to sign a 15-page confession in which he admitted he believed “rounding up so many people would knowingly fan conflict and deep resentment.” Wang wrote in his confession, “Without approval and on my own initiative I broke the rules.” According to *The New York Times*, the documents showed Uighur officials were also accused of protecting fellow Uighurs, and were removed from their positions.

Days after *The New York Times* published its two reports, the ICIJ reported on an additional 24 leaked government and CCP documents. Later referred to as the “China Cables,” the leaked documents included details from a 2018 court case in which authorities in Xinjiang arrested a man in September 2017 and sentenced him to a prison term of 10 years for “inciting extreme thoughts” after he reportedly encouraged his coworkers to pray.

The leaked documents obtained by the ICIJ included a CCP manual, called a “telegram,” for operating internment camps, which it referred to as “vocational skill education training centers.” According to the ICIJ, this manual “instructs camp personnel on such matters as how to prevent escapes, how to maintain total secrecy about the camps’ existence, methods of forced indoctrination, how to control disease outbreaks, and when to let detainees see relatives or even use the toilet.” The ICIJ continued, “The document, dated to 2017, lays bare a behavior-modification ‘points’ system to mete out punishments and rewards to inmates” and to determine when to release them. Authorities were instructed to tell those asking about their relatives that their behavior could hurt their relatives’ scores. The ICIJ stated, “The manual reveals the minimum duration of detention: one year – though accounts from ex-detainees suggest that some are released sooner.” A third document, the “Karakax List,” originally leaked in November and later made public, presented evidence the government initially interned or extended the internment of individuals on religious grounds in four reeducation centers in Karakax County, Hotan Prefecture. It showed that “religion-related reasons,” including behaviors considered “untrustworthy” such as men wearing beards, women wearing veils, and attending the Hajj were the third most common reason for internment, and violations of “birth control policies,” was the most common reason.

In June German researcher Adrian Zenz published a paper in the *Journal of Political Risk* that described how in July 2017 authorities in Karakax (Qaraqash) County, Hotan (Hetian) Prefecture, commissioned a large internment camp with multiple buildings, including a “transformation for education center” and a 2,074 square meter (22,324 square foot) armed police forces facility. According to Zenz, a district in Urumqi published a construction bid for a 36,000 square meter (387,500 square foot) vocational training compound with a surrounding wall, fences, a 500 square meter (5,400 square foot) police station, a surveillance and monitoring system, and “equipment for visiting family members.”

In October 2018 ChinaAid reported first-hand accounts of a three-phased system to which Uighurs were subjected in several detention facilities. According to local residents, each camp consisted of areas A, B, and C. Guards first placed “newcomers and Muslims” in area 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 expressed gratitude to the CCP and Chairman Xi. 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 CCP beliefs to area A, where the conditions were better.

In October CNN released a video taken via drone showing hundreds of men being led from a train by dozens of police in riot gear. Most of the men were wearing vests with the words “Kashgar Detention Center.” The men were all wearing blindfolds, had shaved heads, and had their hands tied behind their backs. In a statement responding to the video, Xinjiang authorities said cracking down on crime and transporting prisoners was lawful, adding, “Xinjiang’s crackdown on crimes has never been linked to ethnicities or religions.”

RFA reported in April that as many as 1,200 Uighurs were being detained in a prison in Gansu Province after being secretly transferred under the cover of night from internment camps in Xinjiang, according to prison officials. Those officials said in the months prior, detainees had been sent to prisons in Shandong, Shaanxi, and Gansu Provinces, although they were unable to provide specific numbers or dates for when they had been transferred. In July *Bitter Winter* reported several sources confirmed some Xinjiang detainees were transferred to two prisons in Henan Province. The detainees were isolated from other prisoners, with many held in solitary confinement and beaten.

The September 2018 Human Rights Watch (HRW) report titled *Eradicating Ideological Viruses* contained accounts from former Xinjiang detainees of interrogations and physical abuse, including beatings, being hanged from ceilings and walls, and prolonged shackling. Detainees also reported being kept in spaces so overcrowded there was no room for all to sleep. In October Uighur exile Gulbahar Jalilova told *PBS Newshour* that guards handcuffed and shackled inmates, placed hoods over their heads, and beat them during interrogations. Abdusalam Muhammad, another Uighur living in exile, told *PBS Newshour*, “There is unimaginable oppression inside [the detention centers]. Every day they’d toss us a little bread and water so that we didn’t die. And every day they would interrogate 15 or 20 of us with unbearable brutality.” Muhammad said lecturers would teach propaganda for 10 hours each day. “The goal was to change our minds, our faith, our beliefs. It was a plot to force us to renounce our religion.”

In a March interview with *Hong Kong Free Press*, Omir Bekali, an ethnic Kazakh living in exile, described conditions in an internment camp in Karamay in which he spent several weeks. Bekali said detainees of all ages were obliged to sing patriotic songs, participate in sessions of self-criticism, and eat pork on Fridays. He said “students” – as officials called them – were forbidden to speak a language other than Mandarin and to pray or grow a beard, which authorities interpreted as signs of religious radicalization. Bekali said the camps had only one objective – to strip detainees of their religious belief.

In June RFA reported that the granddaughter of Uighur author Nurmuhemmet Tohti posted on Facebook that he died on May 31, shortly after being released from an internment camp. His granddaughter, living in exile in Canada, wrote that during his internment, authorities denied Tohti, aged 70, treatment for diabetes and heart disease, and only released him to his family after he became incapacitated due to his medical condition.

A source told RFA that in March a Uighur man who regularly traveled for business to neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Yaqup Rozi, died after suffering a heart attack while detained in a political “re-education camp” in Xinjiang. Authorities ordered Rozi to return to his home near Atush, (Atushi) City in Kizilsu Kirghiz (Kazileisu Keerkezi) Autonomous Prefecture in early 2017 and then confiscated his passport. A month later, local police summoned Rozi for interrogation, but then released him. A month after that, police raided his home in the middle of the night and took him away with a black hood over his head, according to the source. After Rozi died, authorities refused to release his remains to his family members, who were only allowed to observe as a state-appointed religious cleric washed his body and prepared it for burial according to Islamic tradition.

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.

The Economist reported in 2018 that authorities in Xinjiang used detailed information to rank citizens’ “trustworthiness” using various criteria. Officials deemed individuals 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 “sensitive countries”; had ever overstayed a visa; had family members living abroad; and homeschooled their children (which was prohibited throughout the country). *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.

In July 2018 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 that “...criminal punishment would disproportionately target the Uyghur Muslim group based on their percentage of the population.” *The New York Times* reported in August that in 2018 courts in Xinjiang sentenced 143,000 individuals to prison or other punishment, compared with 87,000 in 2017, which was itself 10 times more than in 2016.

National Public Radio reported in October that Nurzhada Zhumakhan, a 65-year-old Uighur woman, was sentenced to 20 years in prison in June for “illegally using superstition to break the rule of law” and “gathering chaos to disrupt the social order.”

The Diplomat reported Zulhumar Isaac, a Uighur living in exile in Sweden whose family had attempted to assimilate into Han Chinese culture, said she learned in November 2018 that her mother had been sent to a detention camp. Shortly thereafter, her father also disappeared. Isaac said, “All our lives we have lived as ‘model Chinese citizens.’ We studied Mandarin, my mother was a civil servant for decades, and I’d married a Han Chinese man. And yet it has happened to us. Why?”

In April *The New York Times* reported one Uighur living in exile identified as Dilnur said, “In the kindergarten, they would ask little children, ‘Do your parents read the Quran?’ My daughter had a classmate who said, ‘My mom teaches me the Quran.’ The next day, they are gone.”

According to an SCIO white paper issued in March entitled, “The Fight Against Terrorism and Extremism and Human Rights Protection in Xinjiang,” authorities continued to prevent any “illegal” religious activities in Xinjiang and to prioritize Chinese language and culture over Uighur language and culture, which the government said was necessary to promote “ethnic unity.” Authorities promoted loyalty to the CCP as the most important value. Reportedly, authorities forced thousands of Uighurs to participate in ceremonies where they wore traditional Han Chinese clothing, performed tai chi, and sang the national anthem. In November on the *PBS Newshour*, Yasin Zunun, a Uighur living in exile, showed a video he found online of his wife, who lived in Xinjiang, and other Uighur women dressed in traditional Han Chinese makeup and clothing performing a Han Chinese dance.

On May 10, in an interview with CBC/Radio Canada, Alim Seytoff, the director of RFA’s Uyghur Services, said, “At the moment, it has become impossible for the Uighur people to even say ‘as-salamu alaykum,’ even [to] give their babies names such as Mohamed [or] Fatima.”

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to deny international media reports that authorities banned Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang from Ramadan fasting, and said the constitution provided for religious freedom for Uighurs. Reports published in 2018 on the official websites of local governments in Xinjiang, however, indicated authorities restricted or banned certain groups of Uighur Muslims from observing Ramadan, including CCP members, their relatives, students, and employees of state-owned enterprises and state-run organizations. In May Dolkun Isa, a Uighur living in exile and the head of the Germany-based international NGO World Uyghur Congress, told *Voice of America* Uighurs who worked in the public sector and students had to appear daily at canteens during lunch or they would be accused of secretly fasting and hiding “extremist” tendencies. Isa said, “The restrictions on Ramadan have been in place every year since 2016, but they are especially hard this year.” According to World Uyghur Congress spokesperson Dilshat Rishit, Uighur households were told to keep an eye on one another and threatened with collective punishment if any of them was found to be fasting.

There were independent reports of authorities continuing to prohibit students from the middle school level through to the university level from fasting during Ramadan. In his interview with CBC/Radio Canada on May 10, RFA Uyghur Services director Seytoff said teachers gave elementary and middle school students snacks and water to make sure they were not fasting, and asked them to report if their parents were fasting or praying at home.

In October NPR reported that according to family members, courts handed down prison sentences of up to 20 years to religious students, imams, or people who prayed regularly.

The government continued to administer mosques and restrict access to houses of worship, requiring worshipers to apply for mosque entry permits. In April *The New York Times* reported that at the Idh Kha Mosque, the largest mosque in Kashgar and a pilgrimage destination, worshipers had to register and go through a security check. Inside the mosque there were surveillance cameras. *The Economist* reported in May 2018 that in Hotan City authorities closed neighborhood mosques, leaving a handful of large mosques open. According to the article, at the entrance to the Idh Kha Mosque in Kashgar two policemen sat underneath a banner reading “Love the party, love the country.” Inside, a member of the mosque’s staff held classes for local traders on how to be good Communists. The article stated in Urumqi authorities knocked down minarets and Islamic crescents on the mosques that were permitted to remain open.

HRW reported in May that making donations to local mosques was considered suspicious behavior.

Local CCP propaganda in Kashgar said the state was protecting adherents from extremism by improving mosque facilities over recent years, ensuring telecommunications and computer access, and installing other amenities such as flushing toilets and electricity.

RFA also reported rapid construction of crematoria in Xinjiang, and said that Uighur religious and cultural funeral traditions did not traditionally include cremation. According to the report, a Han Chinese staff member at a crematorium stated that ethnic minority corpses brought there were those who had died in “political re-education camps.” CCP officials also reportedly forbade Uighurs from performing traditional burial rites.

The government facilitated participation in the Hajj, and Muslims applied online or through local official Islamic associations. However, according to allegedly leaked government documents from Karakax County, Hotan Prefecture, authorities considered individuals to be suspicious or potentially dangerous if they had participated in the Hajj, regardless of whether the individual participated as part of a government-approved tour group or otherwise. In August the pro-CCP media outlet *Global Times* stated 11,000 Uighur and other Muslims were expected to make take part in the Hajj during the year, compared with 11,500 in 2018, although official statistics confirming this number was accurate were unavailable at year’s end.

Witnesses and former prisoners stated authorities forced Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs, and others to renounce Islam, criticize their own Islamic beliefs and those of fellow inmates, and recite Communist Party propaganda in the internment camps.

International media reported the government continued to instruct officials to look out for 75 “signs” or behaviors that signified religious extremism. These signs and behaviors included growing a beard, praying in public outside of mosques, wearing veils and headscarves, and abstaining from smoking or drinking alcohol.

According to human rights groups and international media, authorities in Xinjiang continued to maintain extensive and invasive security and surveillance, reportedly in part to gain information regarding individuals’ religious adherence and practices. Human rights groups said surveillance was more severe in parts of the country where religious minorities predominated, including Xinjiang, compared to other parts of the country with ethnic Han Chinese majorities, due in part to the connection between religion and the ethnic and cultural identities of these groups.

In April *The New York Times* reported one Uighur living in exile identified as Dilnur said authorities often searched private homes. “They don’t care if it’s morning or night, they would come in every time they want.”

As reported in media, according to leaked documents obtained by the ICIJ in November, authorities used tools including closed circuit television cameras, mobile phone spyware apps, and “Wi-Fi sniffers” (akin to wiretaps on internet traffic) which monitored all network devices in range. Authorities used artificial intelligence to create predictive models of behavior to flag individuals whom the government deemed suspicious. *The New York Times* stated in May that these measures targeted ethnic minorities while largely ignoring ethnic Han Chinese in the region. There were reports authorities used facial recognition technology to target Uighurs and members of other citizens who did not have typical Han Chinese features.

In May HRW reported the government continued to require 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 a punishable offense. The report stated Wi-Fi sniffers in public places monitored all networked devices in range.

The police used the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), the Xinjiang policing program to aggregate data about people and flag those deemed potentially threatening. According to an HRW report published in May, “Analysis of the IJOP app reveals that authorities are collecting massive amounts of personal information – from the color of a person’s car to their height down to the precise centimeter – and feeding it into the IJOP central system, linking that data to the person’s national identification card number.” The IJOP also flagged what authorities considered suspicious behavior such as using “excessive” electricity, using a cell phone that was not registered to that person, or entering and exiting the home via the back door instead of the front door. According to HRW’s analysis, based on the kinds of information collected, the IJOP app

“demonstrates that Chinese authorities consider certain peaceful religious activities as suspicious, such as donating to mosques or preaching the Quran without authorization.”

In February a security researcher at the Dutch NGO GDI Foundation discovered a publicly accessible database containing personal information such as ethnicity and GPS tracking data of 2.6 million people in Xinjiang. Other publications reported on DNA collection, voice collection, and facial recognition collection to track individuals living in Xinjiang.

A former Xinjiang resident told HRW that a week after he was released from arbitrary detention he entered a mall and an orange alarm went off. Police took him to a police station but released him with the warning, “Just don’t go to any public places.”

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. Multiple media outlets reported that tourists at the border were required to install spyware on their mobile devices prior to entering Xinjiang.

In July National Public Radio, Vox News, and other sources reported on authorities’ efforts to collect DNA and other biometrics such as blood types, as well as fingerprints, which appeared to be done in an effort to distinguish ethnic groups. Sources believed authorities in Xinjiang collected this medical information, at least in part, to forcibly harvest Uighurs’ organs. According to research by Australian academic Matthew P. Robertson and others about the PRC government’s falsification of organ donation data, blood typing is part of the organ procurement process. Some Xinjiang internment camp survivors reported healthy young men would be spared the physical abuse that other detainees suffered and underwent health screenings, including DNA sampling, before disappearing, raising these survivors’ concerns that organ harvesting from detainees was taking place in the camps.

In December *The Hill* reported the surveillance system in Xinjiang included more than 10,000 “convenient police stations” and government task teams stationed in 8,921 villages. In a May report, HRW stated these police stations were the “hallmark of Xinjiang’s mass surveillance infrastructure.” Witnesses told *The Hill* in every town “each traffic light junction is guarded by two SWAT team members. Every 50 yards or so along the streets, there is a convenient police station, guarded 24/7 by either SWAT, regular police or assistant police, who constantly check passers-by, including searching their smartphones for banned apps and ‘sensitive’ information.” In 2017 The Jamestown Foundation examined civil service, public service, and other public job announcements and found the number of job announcements for police officers in Xinjiang increased from 30,000 in 2016 to 60,000 from January to August 2017.

In April *The New York Times* reported that in Kashgar City, Kashgar Prefecture, surveillance cameras were prevalent in streets, shops, doorways, and mosques. “Every 100 yards or so, the police stand at checkpoints with guns, shields and clubs. Many are Uighurs. The surveillance couldn’t work without them. Uighurs line up, stone-faced, to swipe their official identity cards. At big checkpoints, they lift their chins while a machine takes their photos, and wait to be notified if they can go on. The police sometimes take Uighurs’ phones and check to make sure they have installed compulsory software that monitors calls and messages.”

In April *Bitter Winter* published an account of a Han Chinese man who traveled to Hotan City in 2018. The man said, “Checkpoints were at every intersection, each guarded by at least five officers and soldiers, some heavily armed, and, at larger intersections, heavier weapons were placed. At a checkpoint, every ethnic minority person was forced to undergo a body search, and those carrying a cellphone required to turn it on for inspection...In contrast, Han Chinese were allowed to pass through after simply flashing their ID card.”

There were numerous reports of government travel restrictions within the region. According to a September 2018 HRW report, individuals had to apply to the police for permission and proceed through numerous checkpoints to go from one town to the next. HRW also reported authorities recalled passports from persons in the region and prohibited communication with individuals outside the country, including relatives. In November NBC – one of ICIJ’s media partners in the release of the China Cables – reported that in March 2018 authorities confiscated Zumrat Dawut’s passport after she was instructed to report to a police station. She was interrogated, shackled, and sent to an internment camp. Ethnoreligious minorities also reported increased screening at airport, train station, and roadside security checkpoints. In 2018 *The Economist* described police activities at a large checkpoint on the edge of Hotan City, where a police officer ordered all the passengers off a bus. The passengers (all Uighurs) took turns in a booth, where officials scanned identity cards, took photographs and fingerprints, used 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.

According to media, authorities continued to have more than one million CCP officials from other parts of the country live part-time with local families in Xinjiang. The government instituted these home stays (the “Pair Up and Become a Family” program) to target farmer households in southern Xinjiang. The government said the program was part of efforts to combat “terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.” The government required families to provide detailed information on their personal lives and political views during to the officials’ visits to their homes. Authorities also subjected families to political indoctrination from the live-in officials. The program started in 2014, according to a CNN report from 2018. RFA reported in October that according to HRW, the government extended the “Pair Up and Become a Family” home stay program in early 2018 and CCP members spent at least five days every two months in the families’ homes. According to *Bitter Winter*, authorities in some locations mandated Han Chinese “relatives” stay at least one week per month. In November on

PBS Newshour, Uighur exile Abliz Ablikim showed a photo taken in his uncle’s home in Xinjiang with a Han Chinese man posing with members of the family, Ablikim’s infant cousin on his lap.

RFA’s Uyghur Service reported one CCP official in Yengisar (Yingjisha) County, Kashgar Prefecture, said many Han Chinese “relatives” stayed in homes where no male relatives were present because they were in detention. The official said he had never heard of any situations in which male officials had attempted to take sexual advantage of women in the household, but said it was “normal for females to sleep on the same platform with their paired male ‘relatives’.” Other sources said those who protested hosting CCP officials were subject to additional restrictions and possible detention in an internment camp. Dolkun Isa, president of the World Uyghur Congress, said the campaign has “turned Uyghurs’ homes into prisons from which there is no escape.”

RFA reported in October that a village secretary in Hotan Prefecture said Han Chinese who stayed in Uighur households as part of the “Pair Up and Become a Family” program brought alcohol and meat, including pork, into the home and expected those they stayed with to consume them, in violation of halal principles. According to the village secretary, “We are not so insane as to tell them that we are Muslim, so we cannot eat the things they eat.” NGOs and media reported that officials forced Uighur women to marry Han men under threat of arrest or imprisonment of the women and their families.

The leaked documents obtained by the ICJ in November included explicit directives to arrest Uighurs with foreign citizenship.

ChinaAid reported that in June authorities indicted 17 Jehovah’s Witnesses in the Korla Municipal People’s Court on charges of using an “evil religious organization” to incite the obstruction of law enforcement, and indicted an additional 18th individual for “obstructing law enforcement by organizing and using an evil religious organization.” The indictment stated the group violated religion management laws “by establishing the Korla congregation, recruiting 63 people, fraudulently using Christianity, deifying ‘Jehovah,’ spreading superstition and heresy, agitating and inciting people not to join the Chinese Communist Party or the Communist Youth League, serve the military, raise the national flag, salute the national flag, sing the national anthem, and participate in elections, and they connected with overseas people, controlled believers by taking the most of regular meetings, and took advantage of each opportunity to accumulate wealth, so they have affected peoples’ normal religious faith, severely disturbed social order, and obstructed law enforcement.”

Xinjiang authorities had discretion to label giving children any name with an Islamic connotation as a manifestation of “extremist thought” or “illegal religious behavior.”

A Xinjiang government statement online in 2018 indicated officials had to inspect the homes in which they were staying for any religious elements or symbols and instructed the officials to confiscate such items if found.

In July RFA reported Xinjiang authorities removed traditional ethnic Uighur and Islamic architectural features used for prayers at home as part of a bid to root out “religious extremism.” The report said villagers in Ghulja (Yining) City in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture were forced to remove Islamic ornamentation from buildings in the area. Officials in Kashgar and Hotan Prefectures said authorities forced Muslims to carve away *mihhrabs* (ornate domed niches that indicate the direction of Mecca), or to fill them in completely. If they refused, they could face punishment that could include detention in an internment camp. The director of a neighborhood women’s committee in Kashgar told RFA the government and CCP conducted training courses on the correct aesthetics for households. A village party secretary in Hotan Prefecture said teams of five or six persons that included police officers, party members, and government officials “walked around inspecting neighborhood homes” to ensure they met “requirements.” In cases where homeowners were unable to reshape the *mihhrabs* in their walls, or where *mihhrabs* were carved into a home’s supporting beams, workers demolished the building. One official said, “In Hotan city, all of the buildings had been cleared of these items completely...At present, no buildings considered to exemplify classic ethnic characteristics have been left untouched.”

A preacher from Manas County, Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Xinjiang, said his sermons were written in advance by the local Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee and sent to him via WeChat messaging app. He said police officers on guard at the church’s entrance were familiar with the sermon and supervised the preacher. One preacher told *Bitter Winter* the goal of the state was to get rid of “the pure truth from the source,” i.e., the Bible. “In the future, preachers will be unable to tell whether what they are preaching is right or wrong,” he said. “On the surface, the government allows you to have belief and hold gatherings, but what you believe in might not be Christianity at all, but rather the Party religion.”

Media sources reported authorities did not comply with national regulations that stipulate if a religious structure is to be demolished or relocated because of city planning or construction of key projects, the party conducting the demolition must agree to rebuild the structure or provide compensation equal to its appraised market value. On June 7, RFA reported that authorities bulldozed a church in Tang County, Henan Province, and forced the church members to pay for the demolition. Local Christians said two weeks prior, the government told the congregation to “donate” the church building to the government but they refused.

Satellite imagery analysis released by Bellingcat and *The Guardian* in May revealed large-scale destruction of Islamic holy sites and mosques in Xinjiang. Among 91 sites analyzed, 31 mosques and two major shrines, including the Imam Asim complex, a major pilgrimage site, suffered significant structural damage between 2016 and 2018. In June Agency France Presse (AFP) reported satellite images reviewed by that media outlet and visual analysis by the NGO Earthrise Alliance showed 36 mosques and religious sites had been torn down or had their domes and corner spires removed since 2017. NGOs and other media also reported widespread destruction of Uighur mosques and shrines during the year. In October the UHRP estimated at least 100 mosques in the region were fully or partially destroyed or had an architectural element removed as part of the government campaign of mosque demolition, which accelerated in 2016.

According to Bellingcat, satellite imagery appeared to show that in 2018 authorities destroyed the gatehouse of the 800-year-old Keriya Aitiki Mosque in Hotan Prefecture and replaced it with a parking lot. Also in 2018, authorities demolished structures around the Kargilik Mosque in Kargilik County, Kashgar Prefecture.

According to AFP and Earthwise Alliance analysis of satellite imagery, the government exhumed and flattened at least 30 Uighur cemeteries since 2017, in some cases reintering remains in standardized secular graves and in others repurposing the sites. In October *The Guardian* published satellite imagery that appeared to show authorities had demolished several Islamic cemeteries. The graveyard in Aksu Prefecture, where Uighur poet Lutpulla Mutellip was buried, was replaced with an area called Happiness Park. The Sultanim Cemetery in Hotan City was replaced with a parking lot.

According to *The New York Times*, the curriculum in Xinjiang schools emphasized “Chinese language, patriotism, and loyalty to the CCP.” *The New York Times* reported a sign outside a kindergarten in Hotan City invited parents to report teachers who made “irresponsible remarks” or participated in unauthorized religious worship.

In December *The New York Times* reported that according to a 2017 policy document posted on the Ministry of Education’s website, nearly 40 percent of all elementary and middle school students – approximately half a million children – had been separated from their families and placed in boarding schools in Xinjiang. According to the document, the children were to be immersed in Han culture and only allowed to visit their families once every week or two, in order to “break the impact of the religious atmosphere on children at home.” Without specifying Islam by name, the document characterized religion as a pernicious influence on children and stated having students live at boarding schools would “reduce the shock of going back and forth between learning science in the classroom and listening to scripture at home.”

In July German researcher Adrian Zenz published a paper in *The Journal of Political Risk* examining government documents that indicated there were large numbers of children with one or both parents in some form of internment. The documents indicated this was a major social issue. Zenz wrote, “From early 2018, the state began to issue urgent directives on how to deal with the virtually orphaned children of single or ‘double-detained’ parents, be it through special care institutions or the regular education system. Local governments began to require schools to provide one-on-one ‘psychological counseling’ and to proactively scan the state of mind of students with parents in detention in order to preempt trouble.” There were also reports of authorities holding children in orphanages or centers for special needs children after their parents were taken to internment camps. According to a BBC report, Xinjiang authorities’ increased efforts to care full-time for large numbers of children occurred at the same time as the building of the internment camps.

In the paper he published in *The Journal of Political Risk* in July, Zenz quoted the Xinjiang government and educational websites as stating, “Vocational Skills Training Centers wash clean the brains of people who became bewitched by the extreme religious

ideologies of the ‘three forces’[.]” In 2018 Xinjiang regional governor Shohrat Zakir told Xinhua news agency the three forces, also called the “three evil forces” or the “three evils,” were terrorism, separatism, and extremism.

In December at a press conference in Canberra, PRC Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye said reports that one million Uighurs were being held in detention were “utterly fake news” and said the mass detentions in Xinjiang had “nothing to do with human rights, nothing to do with religion” and was “no different” from other countries’ counter-terrorism measures.”

In August the CCP responded to a statement issued by 22 countries at the United Nations Human Rights Council urging the CCP to release members of the Muslim population from internment camps. Foreign ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang said the statement “disregarded the facts, slandered and attacked China with unwarranted accusations, flagrantly politicized human rights issues, and grossly interfered in China’s internal affairs.” The CCP also stated its actions in Xinjiang were necessary for national security.

At a press conference in August, Xinjiang regional governor Zakir stated authorities released the majority of persons held in internment camps in the region, and that those still in facilities were able to go home regularly and practice their faith. The World Uyghur Congress urged the international community to be “deeply skeptical” of the governor’s statements.

In April the SCIO published a white paper on the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), a paramilitary organization that administers prisons and engages in commercial activity in the region, stating the focus of XPCC’s work in border security was the threat posed by “separatist, religious extremist, and terrorist forces and their sabotage activities.”

In July the government published a white paper that defined “external separatist forces for...the creation of ‘East Turkestan’” as an acute threat to national security and stated the People’s Armed Police, a national paramilitary organization, had assisted the Xinjiang regional government in “taking out 1,588 violent terrorist gangs and capturing 12,995 terrorists” since 2014.

In July the SCIO released a white paper on religion and culture in Xinjiang that stated Islam was “neither an indigenous nor the sole belief system” of the Uighurs, that Uighurs were forcibly converted to Islam, and that the government in Xinjiang “fully respects and protects” religious freedom according to the national constitution.

In March, July, and August the SCIO published white papers on counterterrorism and human rights that stated the government’s political re-education camps were intended to combat “violent extremism” and “religious extremism.” The white papers also stated individuals held in camps could not organize or participate in any religious activities.

In May Voice of America reported that Zhao Lijian, deputy chief of mission of the Chinese embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan, said Beijing had put partial restrictions on Ramadan activities, but fasting was not totally banned. Zhao said Xinjiang residents were free to fast during Ramadan and restrictions were limited to those with official responsibilities to ensure their religious practices did not interfere with their public duties. He also said, “Restrictions are with the Communist Party members, who are atheists; government officials, who shall discharge their duties; and students who are with compulsory education and hard learning tasks.”

The leaked documents revealed by the ICIJ in November included explicit directives to track Xinjiang Uighurs living abroad. China’s embassies and consulates took part in these efforts. The documents described the government’s policy of urging foreign governments to repatriate Uighurs. The ICIJ stated, “Bulletin No. 2” (dated June 16, 2017) “categorizes Chinese Uighurs living abroad by their home regions within Xinjiang and instructs officials to collect personal information about them. The purpose of this effort, the bulletin says, is to identify ‘those still outside the country for whom suspected terrorism cannot be ruled out.’ It declares that such people ‘should be placed into concentrated education and training’ immediately upon their return to China.”

The government also reportedly sought to intimidate or forcibly repatriate Uighur and other Muslims abroad. In August *The Atlantic* reported, “Conversations with Uighurs in Belgium, Finland, and the Netherlands reveal a systematic effort by China to silence Uighurs overseas with brazen tactics of surveillance, blackmail, and intimidation.” The article described Chinese authorities monitoring Uighurs abroad by surveilling their contacts and family members in Xinjiang via phone or social media, and pressuring them to cease advocacy efforts on behalf of Uighur rights. In April BuzzFeed News reported Uighur-American Ferkat Jawdat’s aunt and her husband were transferred from an internment camp in Xinjiang to a prison elsewhere in the region after Jawdat met with the U.S. Secretary of State on March 27.

Many Uighurs abroad reported the government denied their passport renewals and instead offered a one-way travel document back to China. Some of these individuals also reported authorities threatened to put family members of Uighurs living abroad into detention centers if they did not return. *The Wall Street Journal* reported in August 2018 that Chinese security officials told Uighurs living abroad to collect information on other Uighurs.

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. Tension between Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese continued in parallel with the authorities’ suppression of Uighur language, culture, and religion and the promotion of the Han majority in political, economic, and cultural life. Muslims in Xinjiang faced discrimination in hiring and in retaining their positions.

On November 25, a Council on Foreign Relations report stated human rights organizations “have observed that the economic benefits of resource extraction and development are often disproportionately enjoyed by Han Chinese, and Uighur people are increasingly marginalized.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

At the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington, D.C., on July 16-18, the United States and other governments issued a statement that included the following: “We call for an end to China’s mass detentions and its repressive controls on the cultural and religious practices and identities of members of religious and ethnic minority groups.” In November the Secretary of State said of the leaked CCP papers on the detention of Uighurs and members of other minority groups in Xinjiang, “We call on the Chinese government to immediately release all those who are arbitrarily detained and to end its draconian policies that have terrorized its own citizens in Xinjiang.”

The embassy and consulates general delivered direct messaging about religious freedom in Xinjiang through social media posts on Weibo and WeChat, as well as on the embassy’s official website. In July the embassy promoted the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington through social media posts advocating for religious freedom. These posts stimulated online debate regarding the situation of Muslims and other members of religious and ethnic minorities in Xinjiang. The embassy and consulates general created messages for Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr featuring the Ambassador, 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 Muslim population. For example, a video of the Ambassador offering Ramadan greetings to the country’s Muslim community received 280,000 views and prompted an active online discussion by hundreds of citizens. 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 that were related to Xinjiang or that were critical of official government positions.

ecoi.net summary:

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