



Forced Labor in China's Xinjiang Region

Over the last four years, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has carried out a mass detention and political indoctrination campaign against Uyghurs, who are predominantly Muslim, and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang), a large region in western China. The courageous voices of survivors, their family members abroad, researchers, and international advocacy groups have thoroughly documented the PRC's discriminatory use of surveillance technologies and trumped-up administrative and criminal charges to abduct and detain more than one million Muslims, including Uyghurs, ethnic Hui, ethnic Kazakhs, ethnic Kyrgyz, ethnic Tajiks, and ethnic Uzbeks, in as many as 1,200 state-run internment camps throughout Xinjiang. Detention in these camps is intended to erase ethnic and religious identities under the pretext of "vocational training." Forced labor is a central tactic used for this repression.

In Xinjiang, the government is the trafficker. Authorities use threats of physical violence, forcible drug intake, physical and sexual abuse, and torture to force detainees to work in adjacent or off-site factories or worksites producing garments, footwear, carpets, yarn, food products, holiday decorations, building materials, extractives, materials for solar power equipment and other renewable energy components, consumer electronics, bedding, hair products, cleaning supplies, personal protective equipment, face masks, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and other goods—and these goods are finding their way into businesses and homes around the world.

International outcry has grown since these abuses were first made public. The PRC initially denied all allegations, dismissing them as international "interference" in its domestic affairs. Confronted, however, with eyewitness testimony and thoroughly researched reporting from multiple sources, the PRC eventually admitted the existence of the camps. PRC officials then defended the facilities as necessary measures to counter "terrorism," while also claiming that many of them had already been closed. In reality, they had grown in number and in size, with hundreds of thousands of victims "graduating" and being sent to larger and more technologically advanced prisons under false terrorism-related charges. The government also began transferring many thousands of camp detainees elsewhere in Xinjiang and to other provinces throughout the country under the guise of a "poverty alleviation" program in which companies and local governments received subsidies for forcing them to labor in manufacturing.

With so many disappeared into and abused within this system, entire communities in Xinjiang—communities with rich histories and immeasurable cultural significance—have become ghost towns. Those who have managed to avoid detention are still at risk of state-sponsored forced labor and other abuses. The PRC government's Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Bingtuan), an economic and paramilitary organization with administrative control over several areas in the region comprising nearly three million personnel, forces members of prison populations and local communities alike to work in hazardous mining, construction, manufacturing, food processing, and—for many thousands of Uyghur adults and children—cotton harvesting. These products and raw materials are injected into international supply chains, spreading the PRC's forced labor complicity around the globe.

The international community has taken tough action to promote accountability for the PRC's actions and strengthen market defenses against the import of these goods. For example, in the United States, the Departments of State, the Treasury, Commerce, and Homeland Security released the Xinjiang Supply Chain Business Advisory to alert businesses and other entities to the reputational, economic, and legal risks of involvement with entities in or linked to Xinjiang. In addition, since 2019 the Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection has issued 10 Withhold Release Orders against goods and companies connected to forced labor in Xinjiang to block their entry into the United States. Likewise, many companies have taken a stand against the use of forced labor in China by cutting ties with suppliers in Xinjiang or those connected to the PRC's campaign of repression—at times earning them heavy consumer and state-run media backlash within the Chinese domestic market.

Governments should protect and serve their citizens—not terrorize and subjugate them for profit. Around the world, governments, companies, and consumers committed to eliminating human trafficking from global supply chains can all play a role in demanding an end to the use of forced labor in Xinjiang and beyond.

