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NEW
DIPLOMACY
PROJECT

Briefing: Persecution of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang

TOP LINES

- The Labour Party has been appalled by the human rights abuses committed against the Uyghur people and is calling on the UK government to apply sanctions to Chinese officials who have played a role in the persecution, and to oppose China's election to the UN human rights council over ongoing human rights violations.
- The treatment of the Uyghur people, border disputes with neighbouring countries and the implementation of new national security legislation in Hong Kong is a pattern of behaviour from China that the UK cannot afford to turn a blind eye to.
- In July, Shadow Foreign Secretary Lisa Nandy called for the UK to apply Magnitsky-style sanctions on CCP officials involved in human rights abuses in China using the new global human rights sanctions regime.
- In August, Lisa Nandy called for a D20 alliance of the world's democracies – from those in Europe to all across the Asia and Pacific region – to stand up to authoritarian regimes and defend human rights.
- In September, Lisa Nandy and Stephen Kinnock met with Rahima Mahmut, a Uyghur singer and activist, and the Director of the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) in the UK, who shared the WUC's MP pledge.
- In the same month, a 'Uyghur Tribunal' – led by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, a British barrister who prosecuted Slobodan Milošević – was established to determine whether international crimes are proved to have been committed by China.

BACKGROUND

Xinjiang, in northwestern China, is home to about 11 million Uyghurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities, with an overall population of about 25 million. Since 2013, this resource-rich province has become a core region of president Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative.

Relations between the Uyghur minority and the Han Chinese have long been troubled. In the aftermath of 9/11, the state proclaimed a "war on terror" towards Uyghur separatists. This reinforced a vicious cycle of repression and counter-reaction, culminating in the 2009 Urumqi riots. Through "strike hard" campaigns, a growing number of non-violent religious and cultural practices have been criminalised. This has now culminated in an extensive political "re-education" campaign.

In 2016, Beijing installed hard-line ruler Chen Quanguo, who had previously been in Tibet, as Secretary of Xinjiang. Within a year, Chen turned Xinjiang into probably the world's most

heavily policed region with sophisticated facial recognition surveillance systems. It is estimated that since spring 2017, over one million Uyghurs have been detained in “re-education” camps. Though the Chinese Government first denied their existence, and then justified the camps by referring to them as vocational centres which “save” people from extremism, independent research and reports have uncovered substantial official Government evidence of the existence of extra-legal detention facilities and the treatment to which detainees are subjected.

Interviews with former detainees reveal the horrors from inside the camps. Muslims are forced to deny their religion and culture as backward or dangerous and are made to report on each other. Abuses inflicted on the minority group include forced sterilisation, organ harvesting, forced labour and denunciation of religion.

China continues to deflect international condemnation of the state-run detention camps, and also contends that freedom of religious belief is protected by law in Xinjiang. State-run media has reported that there have been “no major terrorist attacks” in Xinjiang since the “campaign” began. China’s Foreign Minister has previously said that the US has been spreading rumours on China’s Xinjiang affairs to smear the Chinese government’s policy and interfere in China’s internal affairs.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In March 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute published a report ‘Uyghurs for sale: ‘Re-education’, forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang’, which identified 83 foreign and Chinese companies which are alleged to have directly or indirectly benefited from the use of Uyghur workers outside Xinjiang through potentially abusive labour transfer programs. Companies alleged to have benefited from Uyghur slave labour include Abercrombie & Fitch, Adidas, Amazon, BMW, Gap, H&M, Marks & Spencer, Nike, North Face, Puma, Samsung, Apple, Esprit, and Victoria’s Secret.

The report estimates at least 80,000 Uyghurs were transferred out of Xinjiang and assigned to factories in a range of supply chains including electronics, textiles, and automotives under a central government policy known as ‘Xinjiang Aid’. The report identified 27 factories in nine Chinese provinces that are using Uyghur labour transferred from Xinjiang since 2017.

In May, the US Congress passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 which forces the President to submit a report to Congress within 180 days ‘identifying Chinese officials responsible for carrying out torture, prolonged detention without charges and a trial, abduction, cruel, inhumane, or degrading treatment of Muslim minority groups’. The individuals identified in the report would then be subject to sanctions, including asset blocking, visa revocation, and ineligibility for entry into the United States.

Research by the academic Adrian Zenz published by the James Town Foundation in June found that natural population growth rates in the two Uyghur regions in China fell by 84% between 2015 and 2018, and declined further in 2019. Chinese Government documents from

2019 corroborate that the decline in the Uyghur population has been fuelled by a campaign of mass female sterilisation in rural Uyghur regions, targeting 14% and 34% of all married women of childbearing age in in two Uyghur counties that year.

The UK Government led 27 countries in voting for a joint-resolution at the United Nations on 30th June criticising China's arbitrary detention and treatment of the Uyghur minority. The signatories included: Albania, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Belize, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Germany, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Palau, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK.

In line with the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, the US State Department announced sanctions against four Chinese Communist Party officials responsible for human rights abuses against the Uyghurs on 9th July. The sanctions list included Chen Quanguo, the party secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region and a member of the politburo; Zhu Hailun, party secretary of the Xinjiang political and legal committee; and Wang Mingshan, party secretary of the Xinjiang public security bureau.

On 20th July, the US Government added 11 Chinese companies supplying major American brands on a restriction list banning them from purchasing American products as a result of their complicity with human rights violations in Xinjiang. In September the US Government announced a wide-ranging export ban on hair, cotton, computer parts, and textiles from the Xinjiang province suspected of being produced by forced labour.

At the UN General Assembly in October, 39 countries led by the US criticised China's treatment of the Uyghurs and called on China to allow unfettered access to Xinjiang for independent observers, including UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet, and to refrain from detaining Uyghurs and members of other minority groups.

In October a study by the academic Adrian Zenz and the Economist found that over 10,000 children in the Xinjiang province were in 'hardship' due to one or both parents being detained. Around 1,000 of them have both parents in detention, and a number of them have been put into state-run orphanages next to schools. The number of children in boarding facilities in Xinjiang grew by over 380,000 between 2017 and 2019, from about 500,000 to 900,000.

The UK Government continues to refuse cross-party calls to sanction Chinese officials responsible for human rights abuses against the Uyghurs and other minorities in China.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 – Labour should call on the Government to urgently request an independent UN mechanism to investigate, closely monitor and report annually on the human rights situation in Xinjiang, as called for by the UN's Special Procedures' experts. A potential avenue to do this would be through the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC).

Recommendation 2 – Labour should support the Uyghur Tribunal and call on the Government to give the tribunal official backing.

Recommendation 3 – Labour should push for Magnitsky-style targeted sanctions on the CCP and other perpetrators of human rights abuses in Xinjiang, including Chen Quanguo.

Recommendation 4 – Labour should call on the Government to take action against companies facilitating the persecution of Uyghurs, including through the sale of surveillance equipment, and require companies importing products or components from China to fully investigate their supply chains.

Recommendation 5 – Labour should put pressure on the Government to undertake an audit of UK and foreign companies who use slave labour from Xinjiang in their supply chains. The details of these companies should be on a public register, which bars them from receiving future public sector contracts or government reliefs as an incentive to stop profiting off the oppression of the Uyghurs.

Recommendation 6 - Labour should set up a commission with religious and civil society leaders to look at the repression of religious minorities in China, including the Falun Gong and Uyghurs, with the aim of publishing recommendations on how the UK government can work with partners in international forums to pressure China to end such abuses.

Recommendation 7 - Labour should put pressure on the UK government to work with Central Asian and other Muslim majority countries, such as Turkey, to grant protection to Uyghur refugees, who are often forcibly returned to China under pressure from Beijing.

Recommendation 8 – Labour should call for the 2022 Winter Olympics to be moved from Beijing to Canada and demand that London is officially de-twinning from Beijing.

KEY ASKS

The below can be used for departmental oral/written questions:

- Will the government call for an impartial international investigation into what is taking place in Xinjiang? And will the government support the Uyghur tribunal led by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC?
- Will the government confirm that the imposition of measures intended to prevent births within an ethnic or religious group is expressly forbidden under the terms of Article 2 d) of the UN Convention on Genocide?
- What representations will the UK make with the UN to coordinate an effective international response to protect human rights in Xinjiang, in line with Articles 4, 5 and 6 of the UN Convention on Genocide?
- Will the government engage pro-actively with partners and allies across the EU and the Asia Pacific region who share our liberal democratic values, to lead the international response by building an international consensus to respond to the CCP's human rights abuses against its own people?
- What conversations has the government had with international partners in the region relating to the persecution of the Uyghur people in Xinjiang?
- In light of persecution by the CCP, will the government explicitly commit that no Uyghur people will face deportation back to China from the UK?
- What consideration has the government given to additional support that can be provided in the case of the Uyghur to those seeking asylum in the UK?

The authors:

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Matthew Turner is Chair and Executive Director of the [Labour Campaign for Human Rights](#). He is a practicing barrister at Crown Office Chambers, specialising in personal injury, clinical negligence, inquests and public inquiries. Matthew is on the Advisory Board of the World Uyghur Congress in the UK.

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About Labour Campaign for Human Rights:

The Labour Campaign for Human Rights (LCHR) was founded in 2013 to keep human rights at the heart of Labour Party policy and practice. LCHR is currently running four campaigns: (1) a [Social Rights Campaign](#), which seeks persuade Labour to commit to a Social Rights Act; (2) [Britain and Her Allies](#), which aims to help Labour develop a human rights-based foreign policy; (3) Defending the Human Rights Act; and (4) Climate Justice and human rights. LCHR is run by a committee of over 30 dedicated Labour Party and human rights activists.

About the New Diplomacy Project:

The New Diplomacy Project aims to help develop Labour's foreign policy for the 21st Century. Our experienced network of foreign policy researchers provide expert advice to Labour MPs and Lords, from real-time reaction to global events to in-depth policy briefings on complex areas of foreign policy. We seek to expand Labour's capacity to think about the foreign policy, while complementing and bolstering the work of its frontbench team.

lchr.org.uk | newdiplomacy.uk

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