

The Mass Destruction and Desecration of Uyghur Mosques in China: Policy Responses and Advocacy Recommendations

Ladies and Gentlemen – it's a great honour and privilege to have this opportunity to speak on this panel today alongside the other very distinguished speakers. I want to pay tribute to the Uyghur Human Rights Project and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisations for organising this event and for all their excellent work.

The appalling mass destruction and desecration of mosques is a shocking violation of religious freedom and one which demands the condemnation and the action of the entire world. Yet it is of course just one dimension of a sustained campaign to destroy the cultural and religious identity of the Uyghurs. Chinese State media has stated that the campaign against the Uyghurs aims to “break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections and break their origins”. As the [Washington Post](#) has said, “it is hard to read that as anything other than genocidal intent”.

Claims that a million, perhaps as many as three million, Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other ethnic groups have been rounded up and driven into these camps have been made by credible human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and accepted by the United Nations and others. Satellite images show the scale of the camps, and British diplomats visited Xinjiang in August last year and confirmed that reports are “broadly accurate”. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has described Xinjiang as “a massive internment camp shrouded in secrecy, a “no rights zone”, while members of the Xinjiang Uyghur minority, along with others

who were identified as Muslim, were being treated as enemies of the State based on nothing more than their ethno-religious identity.”

Earlier this year I met a prominent Uyghur activist in London, and I was inspired by him to step up my advocacy for the Uyghur people. I have already been working extensively on religious freedom in China – the crackdown on Christians, the persecution of Falun Gong, the situation in Tibet – as well as forced organ harvesting from prisoners of conscience, and the erosion of Hong Kong’s freedoms and autonomy, and my colleagues and I had been of course following the situation of the Uyghurs and other Muslims with alarm and speaking out where we could, but my discussions with this Uyghur activist motivated me to redouble my efforts.

“Son, they are taking me,” were the last words he heard from his father, in a WeChat message just over a year ago. His father, a 67 year-old Uyghur, is believed to be among the estimated one million people forced into political prison camps, sometimes referred to as re-education camps, in China’s north-western province, in the most severe crackdown on human rights since the Cultural Revolution. “I don’t know if he is still alive,” he added. “None of my relatives now are outside the concentration camps The main centres in our cities – our equivalent of New York’s Times Square or London’s Trafalgar Square – are empty.”

Check-points every hundred metres, mobile phones checked and monitored, tens of thousands of children, some as young as three years old, rounded up and placed in state-run orphanages where they are subjected to brainwashing, denied the right to speak their own language, practice their religion, eat their

food, and will probably never see their parents again. “People don’t even have the freedom to breathe,” said my Uyghur friend. Uyghurs are arrested and sent to the camps for acts as basic as having a WhatsApp function on their mobile phones, having relatives living abroad, accessing religious materials online, having visited particular countries, engaging in religious activities – or sometimes no reason is given at all. They have no access to legal counsel, no mechanism for appeal, and often the family are not told where the detainee is held or when they will be released. And as if incarcerating a million people in torture chambers was not enough, there are increasing concerns that Uyghurs are subjected to DNA tests, and an unknown number of Uyghurs have been forcibly transported to other parts of the country, including Heilongjiang province in north-east China. These twin practices arouse suspicion that Uyghurs may be targeted for forced organ harvesting, or biometric surveillance.

So – what has been done and what more can we do?

The ultimate goal of any policy response must be to end the human rights crisis in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, including the closure of the camps, an end to destruction of Uyghurs’ tangible and intangible religious and cultural heritage, and a complete halt to violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief.

There have been some actions so far, which are welcome – but are just the beginning. For example, in November 2018 the UK and other UN member states raised concerns during China’s Universal Periodic Review in November 2018 and at the 40th UN Human Rights Council in March 2019. During his opening address on 25 February, Britain’s Minister for human rights Lord (Tariq) Ahmad raised

concerns about restrictions on freedom of religion and belief in China including on Muslims in Xinjiang.

Last year British diplomats visited Xinjiang and confirmed the reports, and a group of 15 Western ambassadors spearheaded by Canada sought a meeting with top officials in the region.

In January this year a debate in the British House of Commons tabled by Alistair Carmichael MP drew attention to the crisis.

On 18 April a European Parliament [resolution](#) describes the current situation as a “new low point” for freedom of religion and conscience, expressing deep concern about the “increasingly repressive regime that many religious and ethnic minorities, in particular Uyghurs and Kazakhs, Tibetans and Christians face.” The resolution cites numerous examples of violations against the right to freedom of religion or belief, including strict restrictions on religious practice and the Uyghur language and customs.

The UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet and the UN Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief Ahmad Shaheed have repeatedly sought access.

And just last week 22 United Nations (UN) Member States have co-signed [a letter](#) calling on China to end the arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in Northwest China. Includes call for China to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief and other human rights in Xinjiang.

Here in the United States I welcome the introduction of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act.

But where do we go from here?

We must continuously urge governments to call on China to close the camps and release detainees immediately and without condition, and to immediately halt all mosque demolitions and other violations of the right to FoRB.

We must press for investigation and monitoring of cases of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention in XUAR, as well as other human rights abuses and mosque demolitions and other violations of the right to FoRB.

We should support all available means of investigation into human rights abuses in XUAR, including inquiries into whether abuses perpetrated by the Chinese government constitute crimes against humanity and cultural genocide. In particular, we should utilise all available avenues for action at the UN including through the UN Security Council and the Human Rights Council.

We should impose sanctions against individuals responsible for human rights abuses in XUAR, utilizing the US Global Magnitsky Act and other relevant national legislation, passing new laws where necessary.

Given the extremely high risk of arbitrary detention and ill treatment for those returning to XUAR from overseas, national governments should also ensure that Uyghurs and individuals belonging to other non-Han Chinese ethnic groups are

not forcibly deported to China, and expedite Uyghur political asylum and refugee applications.

Other governments should follow the example of the US Congress and pass legislation condemning human rights abuses in XUAR, including religious freedom violations, including plans for addressing these violations at the national and international level.

For those of us in civil society: Human rights organisations should continue to raise FoRB violations, including the demolition and change-of-use of mosques and other religious building, through every available avenue and mechanism, continuously seeking ways to empower survivors, witnesses and activists.

International humanitarian organisations should seek access to all detention facilities holding Uyghur detainees, and state facilities holding Uyghur children, for the purpose of compiling information necessary to facilitate the reunification of families.

Faith-based groups, including Muslim leaders and communities, are urged to call for the closure of the camps, the release of detainees, and the restoration of thousands of mosques that have been shuttered, bulldozed, or forced to change their use.

Academic institutions, publishers and entities with exchanges programmes with the Chinese government should urgently consider whether their collaboration is helping or hindering the protection of human rights in Xinjiang, and act accordingly.

At the 41st Session of the UN Human Rights Council this July, CSW and three other organisations delivered [a statement](#) expressing concerns over the use of surveillance technology to restrict the fundamental freedoms of Uyghur Muslims. The organisations echoed concerns put forward by the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression over the “comprehensive intrusiveness” of surveillance technology in the People’s Republic of China.

Companies must conduct robust human rights due diligence; we urge companies to adopt strong human rights policies to combat misuse of their technology to target and surveil defenders and other populations.

Similarly a letter by the COALITION TO ADVANCE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN CHINA urges companies doing business with China to proactively adopt a corporate social responsibility strategy, to:

- Form an action plan to prevent complicity in equipping Chinese detention camps, security forces, or Chinese companies with technology that will be used to strip the people of China of their basic human rights
- Refuse to censor their website or social platform’s content for the Chinese government or surrender sensitive user information
- Hold strategic meetings with civil society stakeholders and technology and human rights activists engaged on these issues who can provide valuable insight that can be adopted into their action plans

Any plans should include, wherever possible, the input and voices of survivors, witnesses, and family members of Uyghurs and others detained in Xinjiang and

the Uyghur diaspora around the world, as well as civil society organisations, academics, and others working on this issue.

Recently, there has been lots more attention on this issue, including high-level statements of concern; we must now focus on *turning attention into action*.

For as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: “Silence in the face of evil is itself evil. Not to speak is to speak; not to act is to act.”

Too often the words “Never again” have been spoken after mass atrocities, when it is too late. Let it not be “Never again” all over again for the Uyghurs and other Muslims in China today.