

# China

## **‘Crimes against Humanity’ in Xinjiang**

Mahesh Ranjan Debata\*

While assessing the human rights situations in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner Human Rights (UNOHCHR), in its report published on August 31, 2022, described the Chinese excesses and atrocities meted out to the minorities in Xinjiang, especially Uyghurs, as “crimes against humanity.”<sup>1</sup> Earlier, many individuals, global institutions and organisations, civil society groups, human rights groups (especially Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International), scholars and academicians, activists, thinktanks, media agencies, and various governments and country heads have expressed serious concern over the human rights violations against Uyghurs, besides other minority groups such as Kazakhs, Kyrgyzs and Huis. The US State Department and

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1 The UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioners, “OHCHR Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, People’s Republic of China”, August 31, 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

many other Western governments have gone to the extent of dubbing the atrocities against Uyghurs as “genocide.”<sup>2</sup> Recently, during the Winter Session of India’s Parliament in New Delhi, on December 5, 2023, Aneel Prasad Hegde, a Member of the Upper House (Rajya Sabha) raised the issue of human rights atrocities in Xinjiang and urged the Indian government to start a campaign against Chinese brutality. For the first time, an Indian lawmaker focused on China’s persecution of Uyghur Muslims, describing the Chinese communist regime’s human rights situation as “very grave.”<sup>3</sup> Earlier, in 2019, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) released a set of confidential documents called *China Cable*, shedding light on China’s mass detention camps in Xinjiang. Furthermore, the accounts of many Uyghur women such as Saliha, Mihrigul Tursun, Tursinay Ziyawdun, Gulbahar Jelilova, Gulbahar Hatiwaji, Zumret Dawut, Rukiya Perhat, Sayragul Sautbay, Kalbinur Sidik, and many other unknown Uyghur and Kazakh women,<sup>4</sup> after their release from the internment camps across Xinjiang, showcase the grim picture of the human rights conditions of the Uyghurs

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- 2 The term “genocide” has been mentioned 27 times in the 2021 International Religious Freedom Report published by the US State Department. The Report also talks about “cultural genocide” in Xinjiang. For more details, see The US State Department, “China (includes Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Macau), 2021, International Religious Freedom Report, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/CHINA-INCLUDES-TIBET-XINJIANG-HONG-KONG-AND-MACAU-2021-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>.
  - 3 Venus Upadhyaya, “Indian Lawmakers Raise Concern about Human Rights Crisis in China”, *The Epoch Times*, December 12, 2023, <https://www.theepochtimes.com/world/in-depth-indian-lawmakers-raise-concerns-about-human-rights-crisis-in-china-5542219>.
  - 4 Zubayra Shamseden, “The Ghulja Massacre of 1997 and the Face of Uyghur Genocide Today”, *The Diplomat*, February 5, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/the-ghulja-massacre-of-1997-and-the-face-of-uyghur-genocide-today/>.

in Xinjiang, especially the crimes against women. Two case studies of discrimination and harassment meted out to Uyghurs can be mentioned here, one by Gulbahar Hatiwaji and the other by Sayragul Sautbay, who had expressed their harrowing tales in Xinjiang's internment camps through their books.<sup>5</sup> Gulbahar described her more than two-year long torture by the Chinese through scaffolding, shocks through electric chair, special helmets and wrist bands, drowning etc. Sayragul, who was awarded the prestigious International Women of Courage Award by the US State Department in 2020, managed to escape "the largest open-air prison of world" in Xinjiang. Sayragul was subject to electric shocks through chairs, sleeping on cold concrete floor during winter that led to severe arthritis, besides being subjected to psychological terror due to the screams of other prisoners.

The Chinese Central Government has been violating human rights in Xinjiang in a very systematic manner since its incorporation as the People's Republic of China (henceforth PRC) in 1949. Further, the human rights situation in Xinjiang has deteriorated abysmally during the last decade of Xi Jinping as President of the PRC.

China defends its action in XUAR on the pretext of safeguarding its national interest in this strategically important northwestern frontier.

Research over the past years, with substantial primary and secondary source materials, especially the author's own interaction with Uyghurs across the globe, the White Papers

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5 Gulbahar Hatiwaji and Rozenn Morgat. *How I Survived a Chinese 'Re-Education Camp': A Uyghur Woman's Story*, Seven Stories Press, NY, Oakland, 2023, pp. 102, 111 and 137; Sayragul Sauytbay and Alexandra Cavelius, *The Chief Witness: Escape from China's Modern-day Concentration Camps*, Scribe Publications., London, 2021, pp. 129, 140 and 188.

published by the State Council Information Office of the PRC, various reports by the US State Department, the Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, etc., establish the human rights violations in Xinjiang, and document the similarities between Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping's actions against the Uyghurs of Xinjiang.

### **HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN XUAR: FROM MAO TO XI**

Human rights violations are not new to China, even in Xinjiang. For decades these have been routinely practiced by the Chinese Central Government. Since the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the regimes, from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping, have pursued policies to prosecute, even execute, anyone who is found by the Central Government to be 'anti-state, anti-nation, anti-Chinese and anti-Communist Party of China (CCP).' In Xinjiang, Chinese policies over the last seven decades or so have blatantly violated multiple human rights, including the rights to liberty and security of person; privacy; freedom of movement, opinion and expression, thought, conscience, religion and belief, participation in cultural life, etc.<sup>6</sup> The worst violation of human rights was witnessed during the Cultural Revolution led by Mao Zedong as well as during the ongoing years of rule by Xi Jinping, the present President of China who, perhaps, wants a "Xinjiang without Uyghurs."<sup>7</sup> The nearly four decades of combined rule by Mao Zedong (1949-1976) and Xi Jinping (since 2013 till date), which are more than the half of the total years of existence of PRC, have witnessed the worst form of human rights violation in Xinjiang.

For instance, during the decade-long Cultural Revolution of the Mao era, hundreds of thousands of members of ethnic

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6 Amnesty International, "China 2022", <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/east-asia/china/report-china/>.

7 Gulbahar Haitiwaji and Rozenn Morgat. op. cit., p.20.

minority groups, especially Uyghurs and Tibetans, were ‘purged’. Besides, the atheist communist leadership under Mao pursued a policy that curtailed religious freedom in Xinjiang, outlawed Islam, persecuted, imprisoned and even killed Uyghur religious leaders, abolished Muslim holidays and festivals like *Ramadan*, halted Haj pilgrimage, and desecrated mosques and cemeteries. Religious worship and religious education were forbidden, even utterances like *Inshallah* (God Willing) was prohibited.<sup>8</sup> Because of their anti-minority policies and anti-human rights stance, people did not hesitate in dubbing Mao Zedong as China’s Joseph Stalin and Xi Jinping as China’s Adolf Hitler, two among the worst human rights’ abusers in history.

Similarly, in the ongoing ‘reign of terror’ since 2017, the Xi Jinping Government has arbitrarily detained over one million people (mostly Uyghurs) in Xinjiang, meted out extraordinary torture, enforced disappearances, mass surveillance, cultural and religious persecution, extra-judicial killings, separation of families, sexual violence and violations of reproductive rights, besides subjecting Uyghurs and other minority groups to forced labour inside and outside Xinjiang.<sup>9</sup> Table-1 presents data on deaths due to repression in Xinjiang since January 2017 till date. According to Amnesty International, the internment camps or so-called ‘re-education camps’ (as described by the Chinese Government) have taken on a darker role, resembling the infamous labour camps of the Mao Zedong era. Anyone perceived as disloyal to the state or the CCP is sent to these

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8 Mahesh Ranjan Debata, *China’s Minorities: Ethnic-Religious Separatism in Xinjiang*, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 83 and 127.

9 Human Rights Watch, “Asleep at the Wheel: Car Companies’ Complicity in Forced Labor in China”, February 1, 2024, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/01/asleep-wheel/car-companies-complicity-forced-labor-china>.

camps, reminiscent of the past, when political dissidents faced the same fate.

**TABLE-1**

<b>Victim Deaths due to Chinese Repression (January 2017 to present)</b>		
1.	Victims who died in police custody or shortly after	23
2.	Victims who died in internment camps or shortly after	67
3.	Victims who died while serving a sentence or shortly after	61
4.	Victims who died in an unspecified form of hard detention or shortly after	39

Source: Xinjiang Victims Database, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#lists>

Tragically, these re-education camps have become places of torture and punishment, particularly targeting ethnic minorities, such as Uyghurs, leading to a state of constant terror among these communities and their incarcerated family members and relatives.<sup>10</sup>

**TABLE-2**

<b>Chinese Facilities for Internment of Minorities</b>		
1.	Specific Prisons	26,813
2.	Specific Camps	1,563
3.	Specific Police Detention Centres	1,098
4.	Specific Factories	24,358

Source: Xinjiang Victims Database, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#lists>

According to one estimate, in 2017 alone, arbitrary detentions in Xinjiang accounted for nearly 21 per cent of the total arrests in China. Average arrests as per provincial

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10 Amnesty International, “Like we were Enemies in a War: China’s Mass Internment, Torture, and Persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang”, June 10, 2021, file:///C:/Users/user/Downloads/Amnesty-International\_China-Report\_FINAL.pdf.

## 'Crimes against Humanity' in Xinjiang

population is much higher in XUAR than anywhere else in the country, as the population of the region is only 1.5 per cent of China's total population (see Table 3). What is more disturbing is that many Uyghur children, whose parents have been arbitrarily detained, are forcibly kept in state-controlled orphanages and boarding schools, even boarding pre-schools,<sup>11</sup> putting immense stress on young and impressionable minds.

**TABLE-3**

<b>Arbitrary Detention of Minorities, 2018-2019</b>		
1.	15-day Arrests	61
2.	Forced Job Placement/Labour	29,362
3.	Forcefully assigned work following graduation from Camp	121
4.	Victims flagged by the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP)	8,439
5.	Sentenced in Camps	106
6.	From Prison to Camp	28
7.	Multiple Prison Sentences	707
8.	Rushed Sentences	663

Source: Xinjiang Victims Database, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#lists>

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11 Human Rights Watch, "Break their Lineage, Break their Roots: China's Crimes against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims", April 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/04/19/break-their-lineage-break-their-roots/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting>.

**TABLE-4**

<b>Minority Prisoners as per various Leaked Chinese Documents</b>			
<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Documents/Lists</b>	<b>Leaked in the Year</b>	<b>Number of prisoners</b>
1.	2010-2015 Prisoners' List	2021	18,192
2.	QQ Files	NA	15,613
3.	Qaraqash List	2019	583
4.	Urumqi Public Security Bureau Files	NA	36,842
5.	Konashahr Prisoners	2021	10,310
6.	Xinjiang Police Files	2022	21,176

Source: Xinjiang Victims Database, <https://shahit.biz/eng/#lists>

Xi Jinping’s reign of terror knew no bounds when he appointed Chen Quanguo as CCP’s Secretary in the charge of XUAR in mid-2016. Chen, who was infamous for his brutalities in Tibet, undertook:

- grid-style social management,
- technology-intensive approach to urban governance and intelligence-led policing (as seen in cities in China’s eastern part since the mid-to-late 2000s), and
- the establishment of some 7,500 ‘convenience police stations’ within a span of six months in early 2017, to torment Uyghurs under a ‘smart digital’ regime.

China’s “digital gulag”<sup>12</sup> in XUAR, which is a testament to Chinese human rights violations in recent times, is home to enveloping surveillance, combining human spies with advanced technological systems. In Xinjiang, the Integrated

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12 The documentary “Undercover: Inside China’s Digital Gulag”, by Robin Barnwell has won seven international awards and was nominated for more than half a dozen awards. It has showcased detention of millions of Uyghurs without trial. For more details, see <https://www.robinbarnwell.com/chinas-digital-gulag>.



Joint Operations Platform is at the centre of this excessive and extensive surveillance endeavour, collecting data on Uyghurs through scanners, CCTV cameras equipped with face and voice recognition, and DNA sampling. This vast data is then linked with residents' online activity, banking details, phone calls, and text messages to identify behaviour that the government perceives as potential threats. Under Chen, the XUAR became a police state, unleashing state terror by mobilising 50,000 to 100,000 People's Liberation Army (PLA) and People's Armed Police (PAP) personnel and 9 to 10 million Han civilians. In addition, Chen secured the support of 2.68 million cadres of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC),<sup>13</sup> a para-military organisation that has been a Chinese bulwark against the Uyghurs since its creation in the 1950s.

Other than Mao and Xi, the rest of the Chinese political leaders were no angels, and they too were ruthless towards the minorities, particularly the Uyghurs. Even the so-called 'reformist' Deng Xiaoping was no less brutal and repressive than Mao Zedong. The unprecedented executions in China in the early 1980s and the suppression of democratic voices in Xinjiang (1985) and further, at Tiananmen Square in 1989, are some such instances, which put Deng on the same platform as Mao. In the mid-1990s, under the pretext of combating violent separatist activities in Xinjiang, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang Zemin launched a military crackdown 'Strike Hard, Maximum Pressure Campaign' on April 28, 1996. The very name of this military crackdown indicates how brutal the Chinese security personnel would have been while dealing with the Uyghurs. The brutality of this military move is visible in the fact that, just a day later, on April 29, 1996, the Chinese authorities

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13 Mahesh Ranjan Debata, "Chinese Assimilationist Policies in Xinjiang: From Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping", *International Studies*, Volume 59, Number 3, 2022, p. 207.

arbitrarily arrested over 1,300 Uyghurs, besides claiming to have destroyed 70 ‘criminal organisations’ and seized a cache of weapons, ammunition and money in Xinjiang alone. For the next six months, the Chinese authorities continued with the military crackdown in the nooks and corners of the XUAR. Amnesty International reported the execution of over 1,000 people during this phase of *Strike Hard*.<sup>14</sup>

Another example of Deng’s oppressive and repressive attitude towards Uyghurs was the Ghulja Massacre that occurred on February 5, 1997, just two weeks before his death. For the first time in the history of Xinjiang, the incident was dubbed as “massacre” that led to the death of dozens of Uyghurs and arrest of some three to five thousand people in Ghulja. The detained Uyghurs never received a fair trial nor justice. They were tortured by the Chinese authorities<sup>15</sup> and, in some cases, were executed.

It is important to recognize, here, that the Chinese government had actually unleashed the *Strike Hard* crackdown against Uyghurs in April, 1990, following the Baren incident, but it was made official only in April, 1996. In the Baren incident, an entire Uyghur township in the vicinity of Kashgar reportedly rose in armed rebellion against the local Han authorities, who responded with enormous military force. A reliable tally of the casualties at Baren may never be known: according to the government, the death toll came to around twenty; but Uyghur sources claimed that several hundred rebels were killed.<sup>16</sup>

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14 Ibid. p. 204.

15 Amnesty International, “People’s Republic of China: Gross Violations of Human Rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region,” April 21, 1999, p. 22, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/018/1999/en/>.

16 Human Rights Watch, “Xinjiang, China’s Restive Northwest”, 1998, [https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/china-98/sj\\_xnj2.htm](https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/china-98/sj_xnj2.htm).

Furthermore, in the last quarter century, the military crackdown under *Strike Hard* has been launched by the Chinese Central government in five major phases as a potential tool against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The second phase of this highly criticised military policy began immediately after Global War on Terror (GWOT) was launched by the USA and her allies in October 2001 against the terrorist infrastructure in Afghanistan, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The third, fourth and fifth phases of *Strike Hard* were launched subsequently, after the Urumqi riots (July 5, 2009), Kunming incident (2014) and in the year 2017. However, in the last two and half decades, there have been many mini-*Strike Hard* crackdowns against the hapless Uyghurs, during which many Uyghurs were arrested for no fault or reason, were prosecuted, and in some instances, even executed.

China has been under an authoritarian communist political regime over the last seven decades or so, which does not allow any news and opinions about human rights violation to be disseminated within or outside the country. There are bans and restrictions on international news and social media in the country due to which the outside world has to depend on the news feeds provided by the official and state-sponsored Chinese media. Not only are the local Uyghurs under surveillance, but any foreign visitor is also under the scanner. The local Uyghurs are even banned from speaking with foreign tourists. During his visits to Xinjiang from 2013 to 2015, this author had witnessed how Uyghurs have been subjected to Chinese suspicion, oppression, repression and fear. While talking to a Uyghur in Urumqi in July 2013, after taking part in a Conference, the author found that Chinese restrictions, particularly for Uyghurs, were severe. A young Uyghur, while moving around the City Centre and Grand Bazar Area with the author, kept a safe distance for fear of being apprehended

by the Chinese security personnel. Similarly, another Uyghur academic, whom the author met in Urumqi, did not agree to allow the author to participate at a conference for fear of the Chinese. Even the Chinese hosts expressed displeasure over a visit to the Grand Bazar, one of the popular tourist spots in the city. Further, during a visit to a mosque near the Grand Bazar, a few Uyghur *namazis* rejected the author's requests to talk and take some photographs. In addition, the author was not allowed by Chinese security personnel to take photographs of certain 'sensitive' places, such as the business complex earlier owned by Uyghur businesswoman, Rebiya Kadeer, who later became the President of the World Uyghur Congress. This business complex had been seized by the Chinese authorities since her arrest in August 1999. Rebiya Kadeer herself shared this fact with the author during her testimony before the US Congress in Washington DC in April 2005. Security personnel even checked this author's camera and cell phone for any photographs of 'sensitive places' in Urumqi.

Later, during this author's visit to Urumqi in June, 2014 to take part in a propaganda conference on the *One Belt One Road* (OBOR) project, where more than 300 delegates from around 88 countries participated, the delegates were not allowed to go outside the conference venue as the organizers cited 'security reasons'. Chinese surveillance of foreigners was so rigorous that one Uyghur girl (anonymous) who wanted to talk to the author on the sidelines of the conference was under strict watch by security personnel and could not voice a single word during her interaction with the author. Besides, a Kazakh girl, who was assisting the foreign delegates, was also under restrictions by security personnel, who ensured she did not socialize with them. The Conference organisers did not allow the foreign delegates to move around the market complexes and other places. The most interesting part of the author's

experience is that whenever he shared these facts with some Chinese scholars, they had an entirely different take on this issue. They defended, whatever their government was doing, and dubbed these actions necessary against 'terrorists', who had been involved in activities inside Xinjiang and in other cities of China, such as Kunming, Beijing, etc.

### **TOOLS AND TACTICS**

China adopts an assertive and aggressive posture in defending its excessive actions against the Uyghurs, explaining away its brazen, careless and ruthless attitude towards Uyghurs in Xinjiang. China adopts a range of tactics, such as pleas, policies and pretexts; and tools, including surveillance, White Papers, etc., to keep the Uyghurs under control. It is well-known that the Chinese coverup of its actions in XUAR has, so far, been robust. The intent with regard to XUAR is complete control over the Uyghurs, by hook or by crook.

It is important to highlight here that the Chinese are adept in making pretexts or providing solid defences in favour of their actions against the Uyghurs, as well as other minorities. For example, the human rights violations against ethnic groups, especially during the Cultural Revolution period were defended by the CCP, the Chinese Central Government and other arms of the government on various counts: the instability in XUAR in the second half of 1950s following the Khotan uprising (1955); the apprehension of Soviet intervention in XUAR, which had a nearly 4,000 kilometre border with the Soviet Union, which also had a considerable presence in XUAR since the 1890s, besides the Cold War era enmity between the two communist neighbours; and the USA, who the Chinese asserted were provoking nationalist and separatist sentiments among the Uyghurs and Tibetans.

Similarly, the Chinese government whitewashed the *Strike Hard* campaign in Xinjiang. For instance, the government took the pretext of violent separatism by Uyghurs in the 1990s following incidents such as Baren (1990), Urumqi (1992), Turpan (1993) and Khotan (1995), to adopt stern military measures, which came in the form of the *Strike Hard* campaign in April, 1996. In addition, the Chinese government took advantage of this opportunity to raise allegations regarding the violent activities by Uyghurs at regional and international fora. For example, as one of the founding members of the Shanghai Five, which later became the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, the Chinese government projected the stringent measures adopted against the Uyghurs in the name of “three evil forces” – separatism, extremism and terrorism. Since 2001, the SCO has been including one clause every year, under China’s pressure, on combating these “three evil forces”, at its annual summit.

After 9/11, China also used the pretext of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) to suppress the Uyghur population and intensify the violation of their human rights on the grounds of maintaining stability in the region. It is noteworthy to mention here that China was one of the first countries to have joined the GWOT and perhaps the only country that has taken maximum advantage of this campaign. Through this global counter-terrorism campaign, China legitimized its claim as the foremost victim of the “three evil forces” and relentlessly pursued stringent action against the Uyghurs under its own “People’s War on Terror.” Beijing made sure that no Uyghur could get away at any cost and anybody who engaged in any ‘anti-Chinese’ activities would be punished. Xi Jinping called for “absolutely no mercy” for Uyghurs who were purportedly involved in terrorist activities.

Xi Jinping took the People's War on Terror to a new level. He gave a clarion call to the Chinese security forces to build a "Great Wall of Steel" in Xinjiang against the Uyghurs. He was instrumental in framing the first counter-terrorism law on December 26, 2015, adopted by China's National People's Congress (NPC) Standing Committee, which came into force in January 2016 as the legal basis of China's counter-terrorism activities; creating the National Intelligence Center (NIC) to coordinate inter-departmental and trans-regional efforts on counter-terrorism intelligence and information; the National Anti-Terrorism Coordination Group (NATCG); and the Anti-Terrorism Bureau. The 'Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulations on De-extremification,' containing 50 articles, came into force on April 1, 2017, under which 'vocational education and training centers' were established to impose 'very strict restrictions on Uyghur religious beliefs and practices',<sup>17</sup> thereby denying the Uyghurs their religious freedoms.

#### **SURVEILLANCE AS THE KEY TACTIC**

Xinjiang has become one of the most heavily surveilled regions in the world. Anything on earth is under surveillance in Xinjiang. China employs advanced surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition and big data analytics, to monitor and track the movements and activities of Uyghurs. The authorities have forced Uyghur and other minority people into labour camps where allegations of human rights abuses against them are reported. A mobile app, "reverse engineering" is used by police and officials in XUAR to communicate with the Integrated Joint Operations Platform (IJOP), a major system employed by Chinese authorities for mass surveillance in Xinjiang. The IJOP gathers data about individuals and identifies those considered potentially threatening, flagging them to

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17 Mahesh Ranjan Debata, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

officials. Subsequently, some of these flagged individuals are detained and sent to political education camps and other facilities. Through this mobile app, specific behaviour and targeted individuals who are under mass surveillance system are identified. The IJOP app serves three main functions: collecting personal information; reporting on activities or circumstances seen as suspicious; and prompting investigations of individuals flagged by the system as problematic.<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese authorities had installed some 626 million surveillance cameras equipped with facial recognition by the year 2020 in and around Xinjiang. During this author's first visit to Xinjiang's capital Urumqi in 2013, one young Uyghur (name withheld) disclosed that a large number of surveillance cameras were installed in the Urumqi city after the July 5, 2009, incident, in which protests against racism and mistreatment began, centered around Urumqi's Grand Bazaar. The official reports were that nearly 200 people died in violence.<sup>19</sup> According to him, on the first anniversary of this riot on July 5, 2010, more than 30,000 close circuit television cameras were installed in Urumqi city alone.

### **WHITE PAPERS AS PROPAGANDA MECHANISMS**

Publishing White Papers at regular intervals has become a regular feature of the Chinese central government. These have been dubbed as propaganda machines of the PRC in defence of its activities inside and outside the country. Since 2017, the State Council Information Office of the PRC has

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18 Human Rights Watch, "China's Algorithms of Repression: Reverse Engineering in Xinjiang Police Mass Surveillance App", May 1, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/01/chinas-algorithms-repression/reverse-engineering-xinjiang-police-mass>.

19 James Carter, "July 5, 2009: The riots that changed everything in Xinjiang", *The China Project*, July 6, 2022, <https://thechinaproject.com/2022/07/06/july-5-2009-the-riots-that-changed-everything-in-xinjiang/>.



## ‘Crimes against Humanity’ in Xinjiang

published around 5 White Papers on human rights issues and 10 White Papers devoted to Xinjiang. China leaves no stone unturned to showcase its own version of human rights through these propaganda mechanisms. According to a White Paper published in 2021:

...for a hundred years, the CPC has always put people first, applying the principle of universality of human rights in the context of the national conditions. It regards the rights to subsistence and development as the primary and basic human rights, and believes that living a life of contentment is the ultimate human right. It promotes the well-rounded development of the individual, and strives to give every person a stronger sense of gain, happiness and security. Its success in pioneering human rights in a socialist country is unique and readily apparent.<sup>20</sup>

The truth, however, is somewhat different.

Earlier, in a White Paper published in 2019,<sup>21</sup> the Chinese government made clear that the issue of terrorism and religious extremism in Xinjiang can be effectively addressed through the establishment of ‘Vocational Education and Training’ centres, thereby rejecting the concerns of the global community about Uyghurs’ internment and defending its right to fight against terrorism. It added further that Xinjiang is seen as a crucial battleground in the fight against terrorism and extremism

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20 The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “The Communist Party of China and Human Rights Protection – A 100 Year Quest”, June 24, 2021, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-06/24/content\\_77584416\\_2.htm](http://english.scio.gov.cn/whitepapers/2021-06/24/content_77584416_2.htm).

21 The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Vocational Education and Training in Xinjiang”, August 17, 2019, [https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201908/17/content\\_WS5d57573cc6d0c6695ff7ed6c.html](https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/whitepaper/201908/17/content_WS5d57573cc6d0c6695ff7ed6c.html).

within China, as the region has been dealing with ‘terrorism and religious extremism’ which constituted a serious threat to the lives of its people. In response to these challenges, the government stated, it had taken a comprehensive approach, combining preventive measures with a forceful response. The White Paper emphasizes that the vocational education and training centres were established in accordance with the law, aiming to prevent the breeding and spread of terrorism and religious extremism. These centres were instrumental in curbing frequent terrorist incidents and safeguarding the rights to life, health, and development of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang, it added. According to the Chinese government, these measures were necessary to promote stability and security in the region and protect the well-being of its citizens.

On January 23, 2024, China released another White Paper, in which the fourth section is devoted to “protection of human rights in counterterrorism practices.” In this government-sponsored propaganda document, the Chinese government claims that

China has found a path of law-based counterterrorism that conforms to its realities by establishing a sound legal framework, promoting strict, impartial, procedure-based law enforcement, and ensuring impartial administration of justice and effective protection of human rights.

Section IV states, further, that “China respects and protects human rights as an underlying principle in improving its legal framework and practices in the field of counterterrorism.” The claims that China “gives equal weight to safeguarding the basic rights of citizens” and provides a “guard against discrimination based on geographical area, ethnic group, or religion”, are diametrically opposite to its actions against

Uyghurs in Xinjiang and against Tibetans. Even though China’s Constitution and laws specify that “citizens’ personal freedom and dignity shall not be violated”, as reiterated in this White Paper, individual freedom and dignity of Uyghurs in China has been blatantly violated. Further, China’s Constitution and laws grant citizens of all ethnic groups the right to use their own language in court proceedings, the White Paper adds. However, the reality is entirely different. The Chinese government has been pursuing a policy of prioritizing the Mandarin language over ethnic languages, even at the primary school level. The forcible promotion of Mandarin Chinese over local languages in Xinjiang has hampered the ethnic languages as well as the linguistic identity of the minority people. The brazen assertion that “prisons provide cultural, legal and technical education to increase offenders’ knowledge, skills and employability” has enabled the imprisonment of millions of minority people in Xinjiang.<sup>22</sup>

### USING UYGHURS AGAINST UYGHURS

China has very tactfully offered very high-profile posts, such as provincial governor of the XUAR, to Uyghurs, but without conferring any real power. When the XUAR was established on October 1, 1955, Saifuddin Azizi, an ethnic Uyghur, was made the provincial governor, while the real power was vested in the Secretary of CCP’s Xinjiang branch. Since then, the Uyghurs have been used by the Chinese authorities to nourish Beijing’s interests. For instance, after the stories about re-education camps surfaced, the provincial governor of XUAR, Shohrat Zakir, stated on the sidelines of the annual National

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22 Mahesh Ranjan Debata, “How China Persecutes Uyghurs in the Garb of Countering Terrorism”, *Firstpost*, January 29, 2024, <https://www.firstpost.com/opinion/how-china-persecutes-uyghurs-in-the-garb-of-countering-terrorism-13667032.html>.

Legislative Session in March 2019, that “Xinjiang is a victim of terrorism and extremism, and the education and training centers aim to fundamentally eliminate the environment for terrorism and extremism.” Zakir emphasized that Xinjiang, in its counter-terrorism and de-extremization effort, was not targeting any specific ethnic groups or religions, rather “the three evil forces”.<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

It is evident that China has been systematically violating the human rights of the Uyghur minorities in Xinjiang since 1949. The gravity of human rights violation in XUAR in the last one decade or so, especially under Xi Jinping regime, is indescribable. There have been serious concerns across the globe about the Uyghurs, who are deprived of their basic rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, China has defended its actions, rules, policies and programmes against Uyghurs in Xinjiang through various means. Chinese official documents seek to make the outside world believe that all is well in Xinjiang and Uyghurs are living a peaceful, progressive and prosperous life. Many supporters of the Chinese government, both inside and outside the country, feel the Uyghur issue is China’s internal matter and have dubbed Xi’s rule as golden era as far as security, stability and prosperity of Xinjiang is concerned. They have poured effusive praise on Xi Jinping for handling the extremism and terrorism issue very well and for his counterterrorism policies, often describing the human rights violation charges against China as a mere Western agenda. For instance, the global Muslim community has not responded to the pitiful situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and to their religious and cultural suppression and mental torture. Uyghurs had high hopes from

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23 Mahesh Ranjan Debata, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

their Muslim brethren across the world, who they hoped would express solidarity with their situation and extend at least moral support, but in vain. These Muslim-majority countries, especially in the Middle East, have put their strategic and economic interests over the human rights violations of the Uyghurs, particularly since they have become the beneficiaries of Chinese largesse under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that came into being in September 2013.

Nevertheless, the truth about human rights violation in Xinjiang has an uncanny proclivity to leak out. The international community is aware of the grave human rights situation in Xinjiang, and of the reality that the Uyghurs have been tormented by the Chinese authorities over the past seven decades.

The sustained efforts of the global community are urgently needed at this juncture, but the onus is still on China and its supreme leader Xi Jinping. Unfortunately, China continues to take pride in its success at mobilizing global opinion in its favour as far as the Uyghur issue is concerned, instead of showing mercy towards this tormented community. In the name of safeguarding the national interests on its strategic frontier in Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities browbeat the Uyghurs, its own citizens and the majority ethnic group in the province. As a nation state and a responsible world power, China should not deprive the Uyghurs of their basic human rights.