

René Cassin Briefing – May 2020: China’s Systematic Oppression of Uyghur Women

Content warning: This briefing contains distressing accounts of sexual violence and abuse.

The situation in East Turkestan

It is estimated that close to three million Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic groups are being arbitrarily detained in ‘re-education camps’ in East Turkestan, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where they are “reportedly subject to forced political indoctrination and religious oppression”¹ as part of a wider effort by the Chinese government to erase their culture and identity. Chinese officials refer to the camps as ‘vocational education and training centres’ designed to combat “terrorism and religious extremism”², however, leaked documents, personal testimonies and satellite imagery reveal camp detainees are subject to brutal conditions, including torture, sexual violence and forced labour with emerging evidence suggesting that women and children form a large proportion of this workforce.

The plight of women in East Turkestan

Uyghur women and young girls are suffering disproportionately under China’s system of repression against ethnic groups in East Turkestan. Personal testimonies from former detainees reveal that women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence in camps, likely to constitute ‘crimes against humanity’ and ‘genocide’ under international law³. While women make up only a quarter of the roughly three million Uyghurs and other ethnic groups in camps, the adverse effects of gender-based violence in the region raise concerns for the human rights of women and girls in the region.⁴ Women’s rights, and other human rights organisations have a central role to play in ensuring that women from ethnic groups in East Turkestan are protected from China’s human rights offences.

East Turkestan’s Missing Uyghur Women

Several accounts from women who have disappeared into China’s internment camps in East Turkestan have come to light since 2017 – offering a troubling insight into the scale of oppression against Uyghur Muslims, particularly Uyghur women. Many Uyghurs living abroad, or those with family abroad have experienced threats of, or have been detained by, the Chinese government.⁵

¹ <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2019/07/mps-can-no-longer-hide-mass-incarceration-uyghur-muslims-china>

² Chua M. J., 2020, Those Shoes Were Made by A Uighur Detainee. The Nation, March 5 2020.

³ World Uyghur Congress, 21 Oct 2019. *China’s attacks of Uighur women are crimes against humanity.*

<https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/chinas-attacks-on-uyghur-women-are-crimes-against-humanity/>

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Uighur graduate student goes missing upon returning to China, *Amnesty*, 06 July 2018

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/07/uyghur-graduate-student-goes-missing-upon-returning-to-china/>

The ‘Pair up and become family’ scheme

Since 2017, China has run an elaborate ‘pair up and become family’ programme in the East Turkestan region to allegedly ‘promote ethnic unity’. The programme involves Han Chinese Officials (referred to by the State as ‘relatives’) staying with women from Uyghur Muslim or other ethnic groups, whose husbands have been sent to camps, for as long as five days every other month. These visits involve officials sharing beds with the women and attempting to politically indoctrinate the household. Under this scheme, the Chinese government uses sexual violence and rape as a tool to socially control Uyghur women, and the wider Uyghur population. Further strategized by the government, is a pressure on Uyghur women to have fewer children, with incentives offered to those that comply. Moreover, Uyghur women are encouraged to enter interethnic marriages with Han Chinese men.⁶

Women’s experiences of Internment

Survivor accounts from women formerly held in the internment camps reveals a widespread pattern of sexual and gendered violence towards female detainees. In an effort to control the population size of ethnic minority groups in the region, China has targeted the reproductive rights of women. Former detainees have shared heartrending stories of torture, medical experimentation, forced sterilization and abortion, and rape.⁷ All these occur alongside women being forced to eat pork, a food forbidden in Islam, to attend political re-education classes and sing political songs, in attempt at a Uyghur cultural genocide. Personal testimonies share that guards would watch women in their cells via a monitor before selecting the most attractive ones they wanted, and returning them in the morning. Stories of sexual humiliation have emerged from survivors; where women were forced to shower and use the toilet in groups, and experienced other forms of sexual abuse.⁸ Female survivors report living in cramped conditions – with cells as small as 10ft by 20ft containing 50 women. Women are also allegedly separated from their children when they enter the camps, with their children taken into state-run orphanages.

‘Project Beauty’ Initiative

The traditional beauty ideals of Uyghur women are being redefined by the Chinese government. New standards of beauty set by the State encourage Uyghur women to show their ‘pretty faces’ and

⁶ Baynes, C., 2019. Muslim women ‘forced to share beds’ with male Chinese officials after husbands detained in internment camps. *The Independent*, 05 November 2019. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/muslim-china-uyghur-forced-share-beds-male-officials-detention-camps-a9185861.html>>

⁷ Ferris-Rotman, A., *et al.*, 2019. China accused of genocide over forced abortions of Uighur Muslim women as escapees reveal widespread sexual torture. *The Independent*, 06 October 2019. <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-women-abortion-sexual-abuse-genocide-a9144721.html>>

⁸ Stavrou, D., 2019. A Million People Are Jailed at China’s Gulags. I Managed to Escape. Here’s What Really Goes on Inside. *Haaretz*, 17 October 2019. <<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/premium/MAGAZINE-a-million-people-are-jailed-at-china-s-gulags-i-escaped-here-s-what-goes-on-inside-1.7994216>>

remove their religious veil. The scheme, referred to as ‘Project Beauty’ involves beauty police patrolling the streets of East Turkestan, filming, calling out and re-educating veiled women. This scheme forms part of a wider goal to transform Uyghur women into ‘docile Chinese subjects’ – with the hope that by changing women’s body ideals, women will begin to live differently, eventually altering their fundamental way of thinking – subsequently homogenising and diluting the Uyghur culture and identity.⁹

Uyghur women’s activism on social media

Uyghur women are standing up against China’s surveillance state by taking to social media to raise awareness and demand justice for their missing relatives and those that remain incarcerated in East Turkestan. Many Uyghur women living abroad were driven to speak out after losing contact with loved ones that remain in East Turkestan.¹⁰ Many found that contact originally made via Chinese social messaging app, WeChat, became increasingly difficult. Uyghur Muslims in East Turkestan are forced to block or delete loved ones that live abroad from social messaging apps, threatened with detention by the Chinese government. Chinese multi-national, Huawei, has worked with the State to implement these harsh measures of digital infrastructure and surveillance systems in camps, to limit Uyghur’s contact with the outside world.

Conclusion

It is in the courageous acts of these heroic women that an understanding of China’s sexual and gendered-based violence against women in the East Turkestan region has emerged. These women have risked the safety of their families and themselves to share these distressing stories with the world. In solidarity with these women we must rally together, to not only demand urgent action to close internment camps in East Turkestan, but also to ensure an end to the violence against Uyghur women and those from other ethnic groups, in East Turkestan.

About René Cassin

René Cassin, the Jewish Voice for Human Rights, works to promote and protect universal human rights for the rights of other minorities on issues that resonate with Jewish values and Jewish experience and advocating for the rights of other minorities.

⁹ Grose, T., 2019. Beautifying Uyghur Bodies: Fashion, “Modernity”, and State Power in the Tarim Basin. *University of Westminster*, 11 October 2019.

¹⁰ Uyghur Woman Uses Social Media to Bring ‘Justice and Freedom’ to Father, *VOA*, 02 February 2020.

<<https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/uyghur-woman-uses-social-media-to-bring-justice-and-freedom-to-father/5267124.html>>

In May 2019 we hosted a public meeting to raise awareness of the plight of China's Uyghurs. In October, in a document sub-titled 'Xinjiang – “never again” is happening again’¹¹, René Cassin submitted detailed evidence of China's repression of Uyghurs to Parliament's Foreign Affairs Select Committee and made urgent recommendations for action at a diplomatic level. The Jewish experience of religious (and ethnic) persecution shows us the importance of being able to both hold our beliefs and express them freely, a rights that was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Unfortunately, the “never again” phrase that came out of the atrocities of the Second World War has not applied, and history has concerning predictions for what will happen in Xinjiang, if it has not already taken.

¹¹ <<https://www.renecassin.org/xinjiang-never-again-is-happening-again/>> [accessed 04 May 2020]