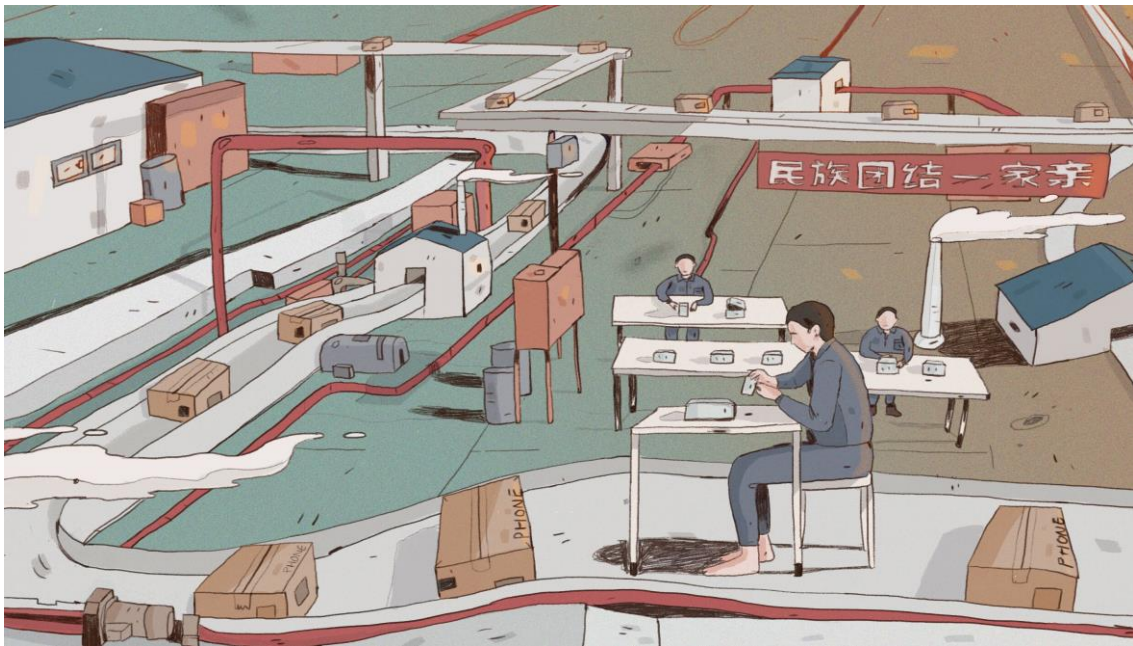


# ‘No More Business as Usual’: Global supply chains tainted by forced Uyghur labour in China.



*Illustration by Yip Wong - ASPI report.*

Produced by René Cassin  
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## Summary

As the Coronavirus pandemic brings the rest of the world to a halt, China, several months after it declared a global pandemic, has begun to ease its lockdown restrictions. The immediacy of the effects of COVID-19 naturally brought production in China to a standstill; however, while stringent measures were introduced to curb the spread of the virus, credible reports and leaked video footage reveal the continued movement of Uyghur workers (transported via segregated trains) to forced labour sites in Xinjiang and wider provinces of China during the outbreak.<sup>1</sup> The transfer of Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities predates the pandemic; however, recent evidence adds to mounting concern regarding the health and wellbeing of Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minority groups in China. The current situation demands urgent action from the international community to bring the inhumane treatment of predominantly Muslim ethnic minorities in China to an end.

As members of the Jewish community, our experience of religious (and ethnic) persecution shows us the importance of speaking up against this injustice and for the rights to protection and equality - rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, drafted in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The hope then, for all future generations, was expressed in the words “Never Again” yet history has concerning predictions for what will happen in Xinjiang, if it has not already happened.

## Introduction

Since 2017, the Chinese government has arbitrarily detained close to three million Muslim Uyghurs, ethnic Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other Muslim minorities in internment camps in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)<sup>2</sup>, as part of a broader government effort to suppress and control ethnic and religious minorities in China.

Whilst considered by many as the largest-scale detention of religious minorities since the Holocaust, Chinese authorities refer to these camps as ‘vocational education and training centres’, which serve the purpose of combatting ‘terrorism and religious extremism’.<sup>3</sup> However, leaked evidence reveals that many people are detained simply for sporting long beards, wearing a veil, accidentally visiting foreign websites or at times for no clear reason at all.<sup>4</sup> Survivor accounts and satellite imagery reveal that the ‘re-education’ centres resemble prisons; detainees are subject to torture, mass surveillance, heavy policing, forced Mandarin classes – all in a bid to control and indoctrinate Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minority groups.

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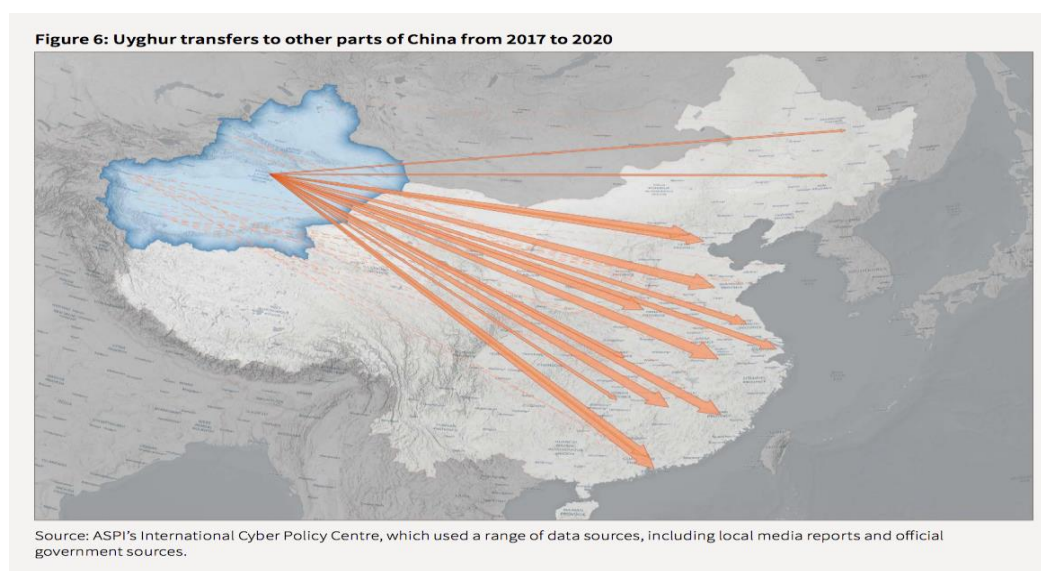
<sup>1</sup> World Uyghur Congress, 2020. China must end forced labour and mass transfer of Uyghur detainees, *World Uyghur Congress*, 01 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2020. *Global Supply Chains, Forced Labour, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region*.

<sup>3</sup> Chua M. J., 2020, Those Shoes Were Made by A Uighur Detainee. *The Nation*, March 5 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Dearden, L., 2017. China bans burqas and ‘abnormal’ beards in Muslim province of Xinjiang. *The Independent*, March 30, 2017.

In December 2019, following widespread international condemnation, Xinjiang’s local government declared that ‘all trainees’ had ‘graduated’ from the centres and returned to society. However, a recent report, produced by Canberra-based think-tank, Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) paints a much bleaker picture.<sup>5</sup>



*Figure 1: Uyghur transfers to other parts of China from 2017 to 2020. The larger the arrow, the greater the number of people being transferred.*

## The Current Situation

The Australian report, which draws on first-hand accounts, official documents and satellite imagery, estimates that more than 80,000 Uyghurs have been transferred from Xinjiang to factories across mainland China<sup>6</sup>, where they are subject to conditions that ‘strongly suggest forced labour’ between 2017-2019, consistent with the International Labour Organisation’s (ILO) definition.

The ILO defines forced labour as “*all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily*”<sup>7</sup>.

Uyghur workers are denied access to their basic human rights - reportedly living in segregated dormitories, undergoing factory-organised language classes and ideological training outside working hours whilst also subject to constant surveillance and are forbidden from practicing their religion.

The ASPI report identified 27 factories in nine Chinese provinces that have used ‘surplus labourers’ from the Xinjiang region since 2017, as part of a government scheme known as ‘Xinjiang Aid’. Vicky Xu, one of the

<sup>5</sup> Xu, X. V. et al., 2020. *Uyghurs for Sale*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 01 March 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2020. *Global Supply Chains, Forced Labour, and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region*.

authors of the report, observes that the ‘goal [of the state] is to Sinicize the Uyghurs’ through this labour programme.

Advertisements for ‘government sponsored Uyghur labour’ have been discovered online – with one advert listing the benefits of hiring Uyghur workers. It reads: ‘The advantages of Xinjiang workers are: semi-military style management, can withstand hardship, no loss of personnel...Minimum order 100 workers!’. The labour transfer of Uyghur workers has created a highly profitable system of exploitation benefitting local governments and businesses<sup>8</sup>.



Figure 2: Labour hire advertisement offering young Uyghur workers under ‘semi-military style management. Source: ASPI report.

While all forms of forced labour are inexcusable, Xinjiang represents an exclusive case in which the Chinese Communist party has launched a campaign of ‘repression, mass internment and indoctrination’<sup>9</sup> to remould ethnic minorities into ‘an army of workers’, chillingly reminiscent of the Third Reich and its labour service. Forced labour is just one of many human rights violations committed by the Chinese government, alongside widespread efforts to suppress and gain control of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, thus likely to be considered a ‘crime against humanity’ and ‘cultural genocide’ under international law.<sup>10</sup> With labour heralded as one strategy to erase Uyghur culture and identity, implemented under the guise of ‘poverty alleviation’ - in line with Xi Jinping’s goal to eradicate poverty nationwide by 2020.

## Implications for the Global Supply Chain

There is an increasing risk that global supply chains become tainted with goods and products made by Uyghur forced labour. Scholar Adrian Zenz warned that, “soon, many or most products made in China that rely at least in part on low-skilled, labour-intensive manufacturing, could contain elements of involuntary ethnic minority labour from Xinjiang”<sup>11</sup>, raising serious concerns for multinational corporations and consumers. The Australian report revealed that the 27 factories identified as using Uyghur forced labour were part of supply

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Zenz, A., 2019. *Beyond the Camps: Beijing’s Long-Term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang*. Journal of Political Risk, 7, (12).



chains providing goods to at least 83 global brands across a variety of industries, including well-known brands such as Apple, Nike, Gap, Samsung, Huawei, among others. It is vital that shared efforts are taken to ensure that global brands are not associated, directly or indirectly, to China's system of repression against Muslim minority groups.<sup>12</sup>

A factory in the city of Laixi, producing more than eight million pairs of shoes annually for the global sportswear brand, Nike, employs around 600 ethnic minority workers from Xinjiang. Qingdao Taekwang Shoes Co. Ltd factory, one of the sportswear brands largest suppliers, has been linked to the use of Uyghur forced labour.<sup>13</sup> A Washington Post reporter discovered prison-like conditions - barbed-wire fences, watchtowers, surveillance, upon visiting the Taekwang factory located in Laixi city, signs that coercive labour practices are in use at the factory.<sup>14</sup>



Figure 3: The Taekwang factory in Laixi city among those employing Uyghur forced labour. Source: Getty Images.

## Xinjiang Cotton Trade

China's forced labour programme operates in tandem with the indoctrination camps in Xinjiang - part of the government's widespread attack on minorities in Xinjiang. This is particularly concerning for the clothing and textile industry sourcing goods and materials predominantly from China. China is one of the world's largest cotton exporters, accounting for 26% of global exports, with 84% of the crop grown in Xinjiang.<sup>15</sup>

A significant volume of apparel is sourced by Western companies from China. Human rights experts estimate between 500,000 and 800,000 prisoners in the Xinjiang region alone are being coerced to work in China's

<sup>12</sup> Xu, X. V. et al., 2020. *Uyghurs for Sale*. Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 01 March 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Fifield, A., 2020. China compels Uighurs to work in shoe factory that supplies Nike. *The Washington Post*, 29 February 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Lehr, K. A. and Bechrakis, M., 2019. *Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang*. CSIS Human Rights Initiative.

cotton industry. Forced labourers (predominantly women and children) produce yarn, textiles and clothing, as well as harvesting cotton in the region.

The Chinese government plans to ramp up industrialization and economic growth in the region between 2018 and 2023. By 2023, it is predicted that one million workers will be hired in the garment industry in Xinjiang, an increase from 100,000 in 2017. This forms part of the country's Belt and Road Initiative (an important part of China's global economic expansion), with local authorities luring Chinese companies to establish production in the region, by offering generous tax exemptions and subsidies, and providing a 'cheap and compliant' labour force (consisting predominantly of Uyghur forced labour).<sup>16</sup>

The global fashion and garment industry are implicated in the widespread use of forced labour in the Xinjiang region, predominantly through cotton production. Among the brands that have come under criticism for sourcing the material from Xinjiang are retailers, Muji and Uniqlo, which both publicly advertised products made from Xinjiang cotton. In fact, a leaked email circulated by Muji to its employees asked for items originally labelled as 'Xinjiang cotton' to be retagged and sold as 'organic cotton', so as not to lose profits.<sup>17</sup> If global brands are to regain consumer trust there needs to be greater transparency in supply chains, to avoid brands being complicit in the repression of Uyghur and other ethnic minority groups in China.



Figure 4: A cotton farm near Qapqal County, Xinjiang in 2015. Source: Adam Dean for The New York Times.

## Industry Action and Corporate Responsibility

The private sector is a central actor in bringing Uyghur forced labour to an end, with the risk of legal and reputational consequences prompting companies to take effective action to prevent forced labour in their global supply chains. This involves divesting from Xinjiang cotton and other goods produced through this

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<sup>16</sup> Zenz, A., 2019. *Beyond the Camps: Beijing's Long-Term Scheme of Coercive Labor, Poverty Alleviation and Social Control in Xinjiang*. *Journal of Political Risk*, 7, (12).

<sup>17</sup> Chua M. J., 2020, *Those Shoes Were Made by A Uighur Detainee*. *The Nation*, March 05 2020.

repressive system of forced labour. The textile industry must mobilise efforts, like those taken in Uzbekistan to change practices of forced labour; using the ‘Uzbek Cotton Pledge’ campaign<sup>18</sup>, companies pledged to boycott Uzbek cotton, resulting in a 70% reduction in cotton production in Uzbekistan. However, operating an equivalent scheme in Xinjiang could prove challenging given the scale of China’s cotton production and the prevalence of forced labour at multiple stages in supply chains. In this case, forced labour forms one component of a much wider system of repression imposed on Uyghur’s and other minority ethnic groups.<sup>19</sup>

## Recommendations

Industry action should form one element of a much broader response to human rights abuses in China - governments, businesses, civil society groups, unions and consumers must all put pressure on the Chinese government to end the use of forced Uyghur labour and extrajudicial detention.

The United States is in the early stages of passing new legislation, a ‘Uyghur Forced Labour Prevention Act’, which would impose tight restrictions on imports from the Xinjiang region.<sup>20</sup> Despite positive signs that the international community is becoming more aware of China’s human rights offences against minority ethnic groups and increasing attention from media outlets on the presence of Uyghur forced labour in the supply chains of several global brands, the inhumane practice continues. As long as governments, companies and the international community sideline this matter, Uyghur and other ethnic minority groups will continue to suffer at the hands of the Chinese government.

As consumers, we hold the power to call on major retailers to ensure that they are not benefiting from forced labour, or greater still demand governments cease trade and collaboration with companies complicit in China’s repression of its Uyghur Muslims. Global brands must step up and take action to prevent the use of forced labour of Uyghur and ethnic minority groups in their supply chains.

Now, more than ever, it is important to draw on our experience of persecution to stand up against the Chinese government’s human rights abuses, political indoctrination and systematic forced labour of Uyghurs Muslims and other ethnic minorities and advocate for the freedom of these peoples.

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<sup>18</sup> Responsible Sourcing Network, Cotton Pledge Campaign, <https://www.sourcingnetwork.org/the-cotton-pledge/> (accessed 28 April)

<sup>19</sup> Lehr, K. A. and Bechrakis, M., 2019. *Connecting the Dots in Xinjiang*. CSIS Human Rights Initiative.

<sup>20</sup> World Uyghur Congress, 2020. China must end forced labour and mass transfer of Uyghur detainees, *World Uyghur Congress*, 01 April 2020.



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## 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. 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 'Xianjiang – "never again" is happening again'<sup>21</sup>, 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.

For more information: <https://www.renecassin.org/jewish-action-against-persecution-of-uyghurs/>

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.renecassin.org/xinjiang-never-again-is-happening-again/> accessed 28 January 2020