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Abstract— This brief explains the systematic detention of Uyghur Muslims within the northwest Xiangjian Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. It explains the growth of internment within the region, as revealed in the recent Xinjiang Police File Leak. Furthermore, it details the current international response to the leak, or lack of it, and proposes a means to initiate aid for Uyghur Muslims in the XUAR.

Keywords— Uyghur, Xiangjian, XUAR, China, Police

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For several years, states and international agencies across the globe have demanded Chinese transparency regarding its agenda and activity within its northwest Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Namely, the West has expressed concerns about human rights violations and cultural suppression of the Uyghur and Muslim minorities residing within the area. A recent press release would support these concerns, revealing details of state-sponsored systematic internment and abuse. This brief ties the finding of the press release to previous evidence as well as explains China's justification for the detainment. Lastly, it explains the current international response and proposes means by which to effectively and substantially hinder China's ability to enforce Uyghur internment or, at very least, profit from it.

II. OVERVIEW

On May 23, 2022, Adrian Zenz of the Victim of Communion Foundation released the [Xianjian Police Files](#)¹⁴, a combination of various leaked files from internal Chinese police networks. The files confirm the West's year-long claims that China has sponsored the mass detention of Uyghurs. However, prior to the press leak, information about the region was heavily limited, as China makes a [concentrated effort to impede the coverage](#) of any aspect of the region.²⁸ As such, reporters are actively barred from entering the region or at least closely monitored by Chinese police when there.

A. Pointed Summary

- Upward of 2 million Uyghur Muslims are reportedly detained
- Aggressive state surveillance and rampant police violence

B. Relevance

With new information from the [Xiangjian Police Files](#), it is estimated that up to 2 million Uyghur Muslims are in some form of detainment.¹⁴ While detained, unprecedented levels of surveillance and police violence are used to enforce strict policies of religious and cultural suppression. However, more importantly, the files revealed grave information regarding the initial foundations of mass detention used in the region. Yet, conflict within the region between the ethnic Uyghurs and Chinese traces far longer than revealed in files.

III. HISTORY

To explain, Uyghurs are a large Turkish ethnic minority group that resides in the northwestern province of China referred to as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Reportedly, there are about [12 million Uyghurs today](#), most of whom are predominantly of the Islamic faith.³² Although the Uyghurs have occupied the region for several centuries, during which they developed their own language and distinct cultural practices, the People's Republic of China insists on an [ancient claim to the territory](#).²⁴ As such, in 1949, the communist rulers of China annexed the Xinjiang region, repressing Uyghur autonomy. Cultural and religious conflicts within the region rose as a result, ultimately causing officials to take more drastic actions.

Since 2017, [eight hundred thousand to two million](#) Uyghurs and other Muslims have been detained in what Chinese officials call “vocational

training centers.”²⁰ In those same years, the Chinese expanded these re-education centers. Satellite evidence shows that thirty-nine centers in the region [tripled in size](#) between April 2017 to August 2018.²⁰ To fund these centers, China has increased spending on construction in the region by [20 billion yuan](#), which is a near \$2.96 billion increase.²⁰ With the aim to control extremism and separatist ideas, the Chinese Communist Party has opted to sinicize religion and cultural practices, a move to enforce conformity with Han Chinese customs. Recent evidence from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute also reveals methods of sinicization used in the region, namely a vast network of education camps [formally charged and equipped with advanced security systems](#) to contain and forcefully assimilate the Uyghurs.¹³

To do so, the XUAR government in [China enacted laws](#) to prohibit “expressions of extremism,” placing restrictions on types of clothes, grooming, traditional Uyghur customs, and Islamic dietary laws.¹⁰ From banning Muslims from fasting during Ramadan to forcing the consumption of pork, the [Chinese government has implemented policies](#) to suppress the Uyghur ways of life.²⁴ More recently, China has [removed domes and minarets](#) from numerous mosques in order to undermine the styles of Islamic architecture and foreign influence.¹⁵ Beyond these measures, the Chinese government has forced labor upon the Uyghurs in agricultural and textile industries, as well as deprived the Uyghurs of their access to food and forced sterilization in an effort to decrease the Uyghur population.

A. Tried Policy

Further information about the detention of Uyghur was revealed by the Xinjiang Police Files, a massive information leak of classified files from Chinese police networks that essentially proves the existence of the Uyghur “re-education” camps. It also demonstrates their importance in the eyes of Xi Jinping’s government. The files contain images of detainees, personal records, police operations, and, most importantly, speeches from Chinese Communist Party (CCP) higher-ups that provide justifications for the camps, along with

recommended procedures on how to run the re-education centers.

The files [themselves](#) were recovered by an independent hacker who hacked into the computer systems of the Public Security Bureau.¹⁴ The hacker then first decrypts files, before providing them to [Dr. Adrian Zenz](#) and the Victims of Communism Foundation.¹ Zenz is a German scholar specializing in the treatment of the Uyghur people in the Xinjiang region. The [Victims of Communism Foundation](#) has received criticism for its close ties to the United States government and right-wing think tanks like the [Heritage Foundation](#).^{9,26} Former founder of the Heritage Foundation, [Edwin J. Feulner](#) is chairman of the board of trustees at the Foundation.¹² While The Victims of Communism Foundation is aligned with the American Conservative movement, the publication of the Xinjiang Police Files cannot be discredited due to the fact that the independent hacker was not associated in any way shape, or form with the Foundation.

The Xinjiang Police Files are a striking insight into the mass incarceration of the Uyghur people. The files contain the mugshots of [2,884](#) Uyghur detainees.¹⁶ Seeing the faces of those affected demonstrates the range in age and gender of those interned. The files also contain images of confiscated “illegal items”, which predominantly include Qurans, hijabs, dresses, and other markers of the [Islamic](#) faith.¹⁷ The evidence of these confiscations demonstrates the strong opposition that the CCP holds towards the demonstration of Islam. The most important leaks of the police files are the speeches from CCP higher-ups regarding the camps, as they demonstrate the ideology fueling the camps. Speeches given by Minister of Public Security [Zhao Kezhi](#) demonstrate that the Xinjiang internment camps are based on ideals of “counterterrorism.”³⁴ The Zhao speech shows how China views the Xinjiang region as a potential hotspot of religious extremism due to its proximity to states like Afghanistan and the activity of groups like the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Another fear of the CCP is the proselytizing of “[wild imams](#)”, Islamic leaders who are feared to have connections to underground extremist movements or advocate

for Xinjiang independence.⁷ Other documents concerning the response to escaping interned people are likely the most chilling of the documents leaked. The leak concerning the event of escape details the policy to shoot escapees dead if they do not comply with officers. This policy demonstrates the totalitarian hold that the camps have over those imprisoned at the camp and disproves the CCP talking point that the camps are nothing more than “Vocational Skills Education and Training Centres” (VSECs), where trainees can come and go as they please.³³

B. Current Stances

President Xi Jinping has not issued any official statement regarding the press leak nor taken any immediate action in response to it. As of June 11, the only time the issue was brought up publicly by Xi was during a video call with the U.N. Human Rights Chief, during which he defended his government’s record. Xi argues that China’s development of human rights “[suits its own national conditions](#),” claiming that China’s method of “development” is solely for it, not other nations, to decide.⁴ According to Xi, the West is [politicizing](#) human rights as a means to interfere in China’s domestic policy and hinder its efforts to develop the XUAR through its own means.⁴ Considering these statements, the CCP still stands by its claims that Uyghurs have not been detained, but simply placed in “Vocational Skill Education Training Centers.” However, with the release of the Xiangjian Police Files and prior evidence, it is clear that is wholly untrue. Instead, Xi aims to turn concerns about human rights abuse into a false narrative that the west is deliberately and solely attacking China’s attempts at development.

Although no significant action has been taken against China as of yet, state officials from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany have come out to “[renewed their condemnation](#) of China for its treatment of minorities in Xinjiang.”³ Furthermore, on June 9, the [European Parliament](#) adopted a resolution that said that China’s treatment of Uyghurs and Muslim minorities in XUAR amounts to crimes against humanity, though not outrightly calling it a genocide.²³ This is in contrast with the United States, which has for the past

several years [accused China](#) of both crimes against humanity and genocide.²³ In fact, the U.S. recently expressed criticism of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet for her trip to China last month, during which Bachelet was said to have “[ignored and even contradicted](#)” the academic consensus on China’s unjust detentions of ethnic minorities.⁸ She failed to condemn China’s policies, and even abided the Chinese terminology by referring to internment as “vocational training” and violent suppression as “counterterrorism.” As such, Bachelet received extensive criticism from not only the U.S. and other nations but also many prominent academics. Regardless, the current international response has done little to initiate any change, with much of it being empty renewals of previous promises.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Nevertheless, as China’s mass incarceration of Uyghurs and Muslim minorities has come to light over the last years, the U.S. has responded with vocal condemnation and legislative sanctions before. For instance, the U.S. [passed](#) the 2020 Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act, sanctioning Chinese officials implicated in human rights abuses.⁶ In March 2022, the State Department [announced](#) visa restrictions on Chinese officials being complicit in the repression of Uyghurs.²⁷ Additionally, President Joe Biden [signed](#) the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, placing import restrictions on goods manufactured even partially in Xinjiang, citing them as products of forced labor.²⁹ The past precedent was set in 2020 when the US Department of Homeland Security [detained](#) shipments containing cotton products originating from Xinjiang.¹¹ The EU, along with the U.S., the U.K., and Canada, have also placed sanctions on China in response to Uyghur imprisonment, which China viewed as an attack on its sovereignty.

B. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Nevertheless, nations who are most vocal about China’s treatment of Uyghurs are currently embroiled in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. EU leaders, for one, are occupied with [passing](#) a plan sanctioning Russian oil by attempting a compromise

with Hungary for the next weeks.³⁰ Similarly, the U.S. has been [placing](#) strict economic sanctions on Russia as well. The U.S. has taken no significant policy decisions in response to the leak.³¹ Ultimately, with the West grappling with the Russian crisis, immediate action that would substantially impact China remains unlikely.

V. POLICY OPTIONS

The recently leaked files only add to the mounting pile of evidence regarding China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims in the XUAR, and the graphic descriptions of human rights violations laid out in the files have resulted in increased pressure on other countries to respond. In its efforts to do so, international actors, both private and public, must first eliminate the for-profit motive of China's actions by imposing strict costs on the PRC and then aid in the plight of the Uyghurs. This must occur in three ways: 1) there must be a public and private effort to remove products made in the XUAR from the supply chain; 2) governments, especially those with large economic influence, must increase the scope and severity of existing targeting sanctions by strengthening the sanctions placed on companies funding and/or benefiting from Chinese actions; and 3) global leaders must shape international norms on Uyghur-related immigration and refugee questions to best help escapees.

Supply-Chain Resolution

The primary objective of a comprehensive international response is to prohibit China from profiting off of the forced labor of individuals in the XUAR. Corporations, however, claim this is easier said than done. This wasn't necessarily true for the cotton industry, as companies like Patagonia, L.L. Bean, and Victoria Secret were able to rather efficiently remove cotton originating in the XUAR from their [supply chains](#).⁵ But, as levels of intermediary production increase, so does the difficulty of supply-chain management as companies not only have to vet their sources but also their sources' sources and so on.

While it is doable, the due diligence required is expensive, which is why many companies have elected a more hands-off approach. [Amazon](#) makes clear in its supply chain standards manual that "it

expects suppliers to 'cascade our standards to [their] own suppliers and subcontractors,'" yet it appears uncommitted to the materialization of this outline.²¹ The [Tech Transparency Project](#) "found that Amazon continued listing two subsidiaries of the textiles manufacturer Esquel [. . .] over a year after another subsidiary was sanctioned by the Department of Commerce for allegedly using forced labor."²¹

As international pressure mounts on the tech industry, companies, like those textile brands sourcing Chinese cotton, will be forced to reform. The difficulty of supply-chain management must no longer be seen as a valid excuse for being complicit in state violence but as an obstacle that businesses have a moral obligation to overcome.

Sanction Strengthening

The close ties between government and industry in China are apparent, and this relationship makes it harder for sanctions to have their desired effect, as the state supports corporations and vice versa. In attempting to find a resolution over the XUAR, the U.S. and its supporting allies must target China's technology giants in particular – starting with "[Hikvision's](#) addition to the U.S. Treasury Department's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) List via the Global Magnitsky Act."²² Imposing Magnitsky sanctions on the tech firm that has largely enabled the surveillance state in the XUAR would not only create a logistical disturbance for the PRC, but it would also send a certain message that the U.S. has reoriented itself in a strengthened position against the suppression of the Uyghur population. With its assets frozen and unable to participate in the Western-led global financial system, Hikvision would likely be replaced by another state-backed Chinese firm. The efficacy of this Chinese strategy, however, is limited, as the U.S. would simply add the next supplier of oppressive tech to the SDN list.

Leveraging Magnitsky sanctions would be a sizable step-up. As oil and natural resources are to Russia, technology is to China – threatening the state's most critical industry will ignite tensions. The Biden administration must weigh these costs carefully.

Migration Reform

A key issue in the international attempt to aid Uyghurs trying to flee the XUAR has been China's aggressive policy of extradition. For escapees who flee to Arab countries – [particularly Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE](#) – the risk of deportation is high, as China pressures governments into complying with their demands to forcefully return Uyghurs.¹⁸ Part of the difficulty in resolving the migration challenge is that Western nations are not as readily available to receive escapees as they have been in other refugee situations. It is very difficult for escaping Uyghurs to travel, without facing extradition, all the way to the U.S. Hence why the U.S. has admitted [0 Uyghurs](#) from China.² The West's role, therefore, is one of counterbalancing. By first reforming their own refugee criteria, the U.S. and its partners can offer explicit political and even economic incentives to nations receiving XUAR escapees to work against the demands of the PRC.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of the policy files, while they disclose new and horrifying facts regarding the XUAR, is not novel news. The international community has been slow to react and has not prioritized the issue. Whether it is because of the still-present global islamophobia or the West's unwillingness to risk their economic security, the PRC has been allowed to conduct "the [largest](#) mass internment of an ethnic-religious minority group since World War II."¹⁹

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