

China's attack on the Uighurs and their Muslim faith

Will the US and other nations speak up?

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In the remote northwest province of Xinjiang, Chinese officials are enacting a cultural genocide with few parallels in modern history. It's been described as the largest incarceration of an ethno-religious minority since the Holocaust. A Turkic-speaking Muslim people known as the Uighurs—along with Kazahks and other Turkic groups—are being subjected to mass detentions and their expression of Islamic faith is being crushed. Uighurs have been imprisoned for such deeds as wearing a headscarf or reciting a verse from the Qur'an in public.

As many as 1 million Uighurs have been charged with "infected" thinking and placed in reeducation camps. Often enduring physical torture and forced labor, the prisoners are required to speak Mandarin and indoctrinated with the views of China's ruling party.

China's plan to erase Uighur religious and cultural identity includes the destruction of mosques, shrines, and cemeteries. More than 10,000 religious sites have been destroyed, according to one prominent researcher on the topic, Bahram Sintash, a Uighur living in the US whose own father was taken into custody in 2018 and has not been heard from since. Sintash has collected evidence from satellite photographs and the testimony of escapees.

To coerce behavior in Xinjiang, the Chinese government has employed thousands of security agents along with high-tech forms of surveillance, including security cameras and facial recognition software. Because the Chinese press is censored by the government, news of these abuses has filtered out of the region largely through foreign journalists and independent researchers. China denied the existence of the internment camps until classified government documents were leaked last year; since then, government officials have described the camps as "vocational centers."

China's role as scheduled host of the 2022 Winter Olympics offers the world a chance to speak up for the Uighurs and apply pressure on the government to relent. So far, China's economic clout on the world stage has rendered many nations hesitant to respond. The US shows no signs of making religious freedom for the Uighurs a key issue in trade negotiations.

The US Congress is, however, considering a bill that would direct the Trump administration to identify Chinese officials involved in the abuses and to deny them entry to the US and freeze their financial assets. The bill would also impose sanctions on tech firms that supply China with equipment used in repression and surveillance. The bill passed the House of Representatives and awaits a vote in the Senate. As modest as it is, such a law would be one of the more significant international efforts to hold Chinese leaders accountable for their brutal and systematic assault on a religious community.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "China's plan to destroy a religious group."