

Uyghurs in Turkey protest Chinese foreign minister's visit

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A Uyghur protester delivers a speech during a protest against the visit of China's foreign minister in Istanbul, on March 25. (AP Photo / Emrah Gurel)

Hundreds of Uyghurs staged protests in Ankara and Istanbul on March 25, denouncing Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's visit to Turkey and demanding that the Turkish government take a stronger stance against human rights abuses in China's far-western Xinjiang region.

The crowd gathered in Istanbul's Beyazit Square, holding posters of missing relatives they believe are being kept in detention camps in China and chanting slogans against Beijing.

Dozens of Uyghurs, Turkish opposition lawmakers, and academics also assembled near the Chinese Embassy in Ankara, as Wang met with Turkish foreign affairs minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and later with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Uyghurs, a Turkic group native to China's Xinjiang region, have sought refuge in Turkey for decades because of their cultural ties with the country. Once a champion of the Uyghur cause, Turkey has become less vocal about their plight in recent years as it has developed economic ties with China.

Initially, Beijing denied the existence of camps detaining Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. It has since described them as centers to provide job training and to reeducate those exposed to extremists. Chinese officials deny all charges of human rights abuses there.

After his meeting with Wang, Cavusoglu tweeted that the two discussed the potential for economic cooperation between their countries. Cavusoglu also said he had "conveyed our sensitivity and thoughts on Uyghur Turks."

China recently ratified an extradition treaty with Turkey that was signed years ago, raising fears among the Uyghur community that they could be sent back to the country they fled. Turkey has yet to ratify the agreement.

Turkey has reached agreement with China's Sinovac Biotech to purchase more than 100 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccine. The agreement raised fears among Uyghurs over the possibility that Beijing could use the vaccines as leverage to win passage of the extradition treaty.

Both Turkish and Chinese authorities insist that the extradition bill doesn't aim to target Uyghurs for deportation.

Wang arrived in Ankara as part of a regional tour that took him to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Bahrain. —Associated Press