

FROM: Scarlet Norton, British diplomat  
DATE: 21/11/2023  
RE: Combatting forced labour in Xinjiang

## Summary

The population of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (generally called Xinjiang) China's largest region, is mostly made up of Turkic Muslim ethnic groups, including Uyghurs, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks and Huis. There is evidence to prove that these ethnic groups are being detained in internment camps, subjected to abuse and forced to work in industries across China. According to the CCP [1], the purpose of these centres is to increase job opportunities and 'remedy the dissemination of religious extremism' by teaching the 'trainees' Chinese culture and useful labour skills. 82 multinational companies have been benefitting from the forced labour of these communities in Xinjiang [2] and evidence shows that Britain is complicit. Given the UK's moral stance, along with our historical involvement in profiting from slavery, there is an ethical obligation for the UK to combat slavery and human rights violations in China. I recommend that the UK Government recognises the genocide in Xinjiang and holds complicit UK-based companies accountable.

## Background

The influx of Han Chinese to western regions of China coupled with the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Sinicization policies, enforcing assimilation into Chinese culture and loyalty to the party, have fueled increasing unrest in the XUAR region. Riots in Xinjiang that occurred between 2009-14 led to China's "Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism" (严厉打击暴力恐怖活动专项行动) in May 2014, resulting in widespread detention of innocent Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in the name of combating religious extremism [3]. Documentation of criteria for "religious extremism" include some indicators that simply represent personal choices in observance of Islam, such as refusal of alcohol or growing a beard [4].

Since 2017, two thirds of Xinjiang's mosques have been destroyed [2] and estimates suggest 1 to 3 million Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities have been forcibly placed in 300-400 'vocational training camps' [5]. Research by human rights organisations and journalists has found extensive evidence of human rights abuse in these camps - detainees are subjected to political indoctrination, forced to renounce their religious beliefs, and in some cases, sexual and physical torture. Furthermore, detainees are transferred out of Xinjiang and sold into labour in other parts of China often under highly controlled restrictions (e.g. Fig. 1.). Research by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute [2] has identified 82 multinational companies profiting off this forced labour, including Nike and Amazon.

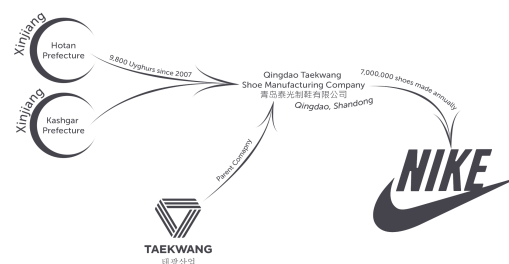


Fig. 1. Korean company Taekwan's supply chain from Xinjiang to Nike [2]

Former UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab marked this as “the largest mass detention of an ethnic and religious group since the second world war” [7]. The UK is most likely complicit in the human rights abuses - it has been revealed that up to 40% of polysilicon (a material used in the production of solar panels) [8] and 20% of cotton across the globe is produced in the Xinjiang region, [9] and the British remain avid consumers of aforementioned brands.

### Policy options

China’s denial of the atrocities is unforgivable. The CCP has consistently accused the West of an anti-China narrative. When questioned on the allegations, China’s foreign ministry responded with: “The smiling faces of all of Xinjiang’s ethnic groups are the most powerful response to America’s lies and rumours,” [10]. Even on Baidu’s mapping platform, internment camps (along with prisons, power plants and military bases) are blanked-out in an attempt to hide the truth (e.g. Fig. 2.) [5]. One option would be **to engage in further meetings with Chinese officials, encouraging discourse on the topic and pushing for transparency**. China is not willing to admit to the atrocities when attacked, so promoting discussions instead of hostility may be the way forward. Transparency would allow investigation by the West and therefore could prompt China to change its policies.

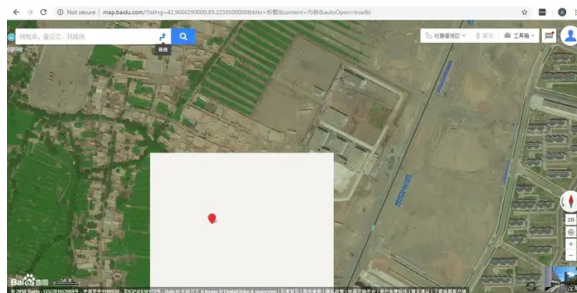


Fig. 2. A masked tile on Baidu maps. Researchers believe there are 315 camp complexes hidden behind these tiles in Xinjiang [5].

However, this pathway will create internal backlash. After the deputy secretary of the CCP Xinjiang Committee was scheduled to visit in February, politicians voiced concern and anger and China cancelled the trip. Rahima Mahmut, Director of the World Uyghur Congress, criticised the Government for engaging with “perpetrators of genocide” and condemned their refusal to use the word “genocide” [12].

The US has recognised the CCP’s actions as genocide and imposed further travel bans on Chinese officials involved in the persecution of [13-14]. While the UK has imposed travel bans and frozen assets of four officials, more could be done. A second, contrasting approach would be **to follow suit, label China’s actions as genocide, blacklist officials such as Tuniyaz and terminate diplomatic engagement**. to the situation. The UK could terminate all imports which are found to be linked to the Xinjiang region.

This concrete action would clearly demonstrate the UK’s stance on human rights abuses. However, previous sanctioning of four officials [15] led to immediate backlash from China - MEPs, diplomats and think tanks were blacklisted [6]. It could also be argued that this approach would cause insufficient harm to China’s economy and only increase tensions further.

My final option would be **to hold UK companies affiliated with the forced labour in Xinjiang accountable**. This would involve applying sanctions on companies and organisations found to be benefiting from imports from the region or supplying equipment to the Xinjiang government. While this would help prevent UK complicity in the Xinjiang atrocities and avoid direct sanctions on China, an internal approach is not likely to bring justice to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.

### **Policy Recommendation**

My recommendation involves two steps. Firstly, the UK Government must:

- 1) **Formally recognise China's act of Genocide:** The UK Government has refused to "make determinations in relation to genocide" [16]. This is unacceptable considering the evidence presented. We must formally label the treatment of Uyghurs and other minorities as genocide.

While alone, this does not form a working solution, it reinforces the UK's commitment to human rights and sets a firm diplomatic tone. Secondly, the UK Government must:

- 2) **Hold complicit UK companies accountable:** Implement laws to prevent UK businesses from participating in or supporting human rights abuses in Xinjiang to reduce UK complicity in the genocidal actions of China. Hold accountable companies already involved - like the 16 Universities (including the University of Manchester) in partnership with BGI, a genomics firm aiding China's oppressive DNA data practices against Uyghurs [17].

This recommendation balances moral responsibility and diplomatic caution. It makes clear the UK's position on human rights abuses but avoids measures that might escalate tensions.

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