

Uighurs

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China is facing global political criticism over its alleged **persecution of the Uighurs** – a Muslim minority group which lives mostly in the **Xinjiang province in northwestern China**. It is believed that the Chinese government has detained up to a million Uighurs over the past few years in what the state defines as “re-education camps”. The government is now also accused of a programme of forced sterilisation against Uighur women.

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China initially denied the existence of the camps, before claiming they were a necessary measure against separatist violence in Xinjiang. It also denies carrying out **forced sterilisations**. The Uighurs are a mostly **Muslim Turkic ethnicity who regard themselves as culturally and ethnically close to Central Asian nations**. The majority live in Xinjiang, where they number about 11 million people.

The region’s economy has for centuries revolved around agriculture and trade. Towns there such as **Kashgar thrived with the growth of the famous Silk Road trading route**. **Uighur communities are also found in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan**, and several thousand live in Australia. They have their own language, also called Uighur, though China is accused of forcing those taken to camps in Xinjiang to learn Mandarin.

In the early part of the 20th century, Uighurs briefly declared independence, but the region was brought under the complete control of communist China in 1949. Xinjiang is currently designated an autonomous region within China, like Tibet to its south, but in reality the province has little autonomy from the Chinese state.

Human rights charities including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have long accused Beijing of mass imprisonment and torture. Most inmates in the so-called “re-education camps” have never been charged with a crime and have not received any legal representation, the charities say.

The province has received huge state investment in recent years in industrial and energy projects, and Beijing has claimed the investments are major steps forward for the region. But many Uighurs complain that **Han Chinese are taking their jobs, and that their farmland has been confiscated for redevelopment.** Mass immigration of Han Chinese to Xinjiang has made Uighurs a minority now in the province.