

UN Visit to So-Called Training Camps and Attitude towards China (1)

China's concentration camps were established under the name of "vocational education and training center" by President Xi Jinping in April 2017. The issue surrounding the camps - containing Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and especially Uyghurs - are followed closely by many states, especially the international media and non-governmental organizations. Reports found that between 1 and 3 million Muslims are forcibly detained under the guise of "re-education" in the camps, which had claimed to have been established to prevent activities such as terrorism, discrimination and extremism. The reports also stated that in these centers all kinds of violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms, particularly freedom of religion, are imposed. Finally, thousands of photographs and confidential documents that were leaked during Bachelet's visit to the region in May, clearly revealed the truth about the camps.

East Turkestan, which is an essential part of the Turkish cultural history and Central Asian Turkish history, has served as a melting pot of various civilizations and ethnic groups. The Uighur community, which is one of the 55 minorities officially recognized by China, differs significantly from the Chinese society with its ethnic and cultural identity. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which is one of the autonomous structures affiliated to the People's Republic of China, is a strategically important region in terms of its natural resources and geographical location. With its natural geographical borders with most of China's neighboring countries, East Turkestan also plays the role as China's buffer zone and has a strategic connection between the country and Central Asia.

East Turkestan's energy resources such as natural gas and uranium have made the region even more important for China, primarily due to the increasing energy demand with the economic growth it has achieved in the last half-century. For this reason, China has been carrying out policies of integration or, in other words, Chinesezation in East Turkestan for many years. Therefore, on the one hand, China is trying to build a single national identity by imposing a repressive policy against different cultural and religious elements, and on the other hand, it is trying to integrate the region into itself by making significant economic investments.

Repressive practices against East Turkestan include a damaging assimilation policy. In this context, one of the most critical practices is the settlement of Han Chinese in the region to reduce the Uyghur population. It is estimated that the primary purpose here is to change the demographic structure and reaching a sufficient number of ethnic Chinese population, hence gaining the ability to control the Uyghur people in case of a possible referendum. However, the Chinese Constitution guaranteed that all ethnic minority groups, including the Uyghurs, would be supported in terms of the continuation and development of their linguistic, cultural, and religious life; and the rights of minorities to speak their language, and to receive education in their mother tongue were respected for a period of time in the country. However, Chinese was gradually taught as the main language with the claim of ensuring equality in education, and in 2002, the Uyghur language was banned even in Xinjiang universities. In this case, it has become inevitable for the Uyghur youth, who want to benefit from the right to education and to assimilate with the Chinese culture. Moreover, the fact that the Uyghurs in the region do not know Chinese caused unemployment, since jobs are easily acquired by the ethnic Chinese population.

There is also the problem of the transfer of raw material and energy resources from East Turkestan to China's eastern coastal cities, which are necessary for China's economic growth, which causes a great inequality in terms of development within the country and the inability of the Uyghur people to benefit from economic development and employment. The significant disparity observed in the income distribution between the Chinese and Uyghurs living in China - especially in East Turkestan, where the sustainable economic development model has not been fully developed - is evident that the minorities in the country are excluded on an economical scale.

The independence of the Central Asian republics after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 meant that East Turkistan had the potential to demand their independence from China; hence China perceived this issue as a significant threat. As a result, the Chinese government increased its repressive policies in order to build a new identity that is homogeneous in religious and cultural terms. Repressive policies against the Muslim identity of the Uyghur people include serious sanctions with the intention of restricting religious rights and freedoms, such as the confiscation of the Qur'an and other religious books, the

prohibition of religious conversations, and the prohibition of mass congregations in mosques and masjids. We can safely say that these "re-education" camps aim to roughly shape China's citizens to be suitable for its "one nation" vision. Although this issue is frequently brought up by the Western media, China was on denial-mode for a long time and only admitted to these allegations after satellite images emerged. Still, the narrative that these camps aim to re-educate against acts of separatism, terrorism, and extremism lingers.

For the first time in 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination prepared a report on these camps; confirming the camps' existence and condemning the Chinese government. Following the report which stated that China forcibly held one million Uyghur Turks in the camps, the Chinese administration reacted by arguing that the practice was not only applied to the Uyghurs but all members of radical Islamist groups, in order to fight terrorism. Again, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted that the Uyghur Autonomous Region had been turned into a giant open-air prison and that China was forcibly detaining Uyghurs in these camps, without any charges against them, by carrying out mass detentions. Regarding the issue, Committee member Gay Johnson McDougall stated that a total of two million Muslims in the region are forcibly held in camps, and they are treated as "enemies of the state" on the basis of their ethnic-religious identities. However, the UN was unable to make any significant progress in gaining access to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region until last May.

Chinese authorities continued their arbitrary detention, physical torture, mass surveillance, and persecution of cultural-ethnic identities for more than four years, all the while denying or delaying UN requests for access to the region. Still, non-governmental organizations, academics, and journalists in many countries have presented various shreds of evidence to the public about the so-called training camps in East Turkestan since 2017. Human Rights Watch presented evidence that the Chinese administration's systematic control on Uyghurs violated freedom of expression and religious freedoms. Similarly, Amnesty International has declared that the Chinese government has arbitrarily imposed all kinds of practices related to the religious and cultural identities of Muslim ethnic groups within the scope of the "Anti-Extremism Regulation." Australian-based think-tank ASPI research found that a total of 380 detention centers were built in the region in just three years and noted that more camps are under construction. Although primary sources are difficult to access, statements of former detainees reveal that those detained indefinitely in the camps are systematically subject to physical and psychological torture and that women are raped and sexually harassed. Although China's economic power is able to hold back heavy sanctions despite its dangerous policies, the recent exposure of high-level officials responsible for the events in the region to sanctions by some major powers in the world has indicated that global attitude towards China has changed.

Later, UN's Michelle Bachelet, who called for an international investigation of human rights violations in East Turkistan, made an official visit to the cities of Urumqi and Kashgar, where their camps are concentrated, on May 23-28, after nearly four years of talks with Beijing. This was the first visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to China since 2005. The visit, which took place when the whole world was greatly affected by economic and political tension thanks to the Russia-Ukraine War, is also of great importance in understanding China's power in the international arena. Because when the visit request - which had been postponed for years - was finally realized, China still not fulfil its promise of "unlimited access" to the camps under the pretext of Covid-19 measures. After the visit, a broadcasted video conference between Bachelet and Xi Jinping on Chinese state television showed how Bachelet praised China's progress in economic development and human rights. Soon after the event, Bachelet quickly emphasized that "human rights should be at the center of development, peace, and security, and that China is in a critical position in multinational institutions regarding inequality" and denied the allegations that she referred to China's achievements in the field of human rights. However, many human rights organizations severely criticized Bachelet's speech at the press conference following the visit.

US State Department's written statement conveyed its concerns about China's continued restriction and manipulations. Former Permanent Representative of the US to the UN Nikki Haley described the visit as a Chinese propaganda tour and believed that Bachelet should be sacked. Bachelet's "effects of counter-terrorism measures implemented in the Uyghur autonomous region on Muslim minorities" discourse was evaluated as a discourse that supports China's narrative in combating terrorism and legitimizes human rights violations against Uyghurs. In addition, at the exact time when she should speak on behalf of all Muslim minorities - especially the Uyghurs - Bachelet's praise on China's achievements and developments in human rights showed that this visit is far from the declared purpose. Secretary General of Amnesty International Agnès Callamard urged Bachelet to resist political pressure from China until her term expires and to publish her already-prepared report on Xinjiang as soon as possible, revealing all the facts in the region to compensate for her failures. Consequently, China confidently stated that the accusations of human rights violations in Xinjiang consist of rumors and false allegations made by

the US against China for the sake of defamation.

Coincidentally on May 24, Xinjiang police files containing photographs of thousands of Muslims forcibly detained in the camps, personal information about the families of the detainees, as well as correspondence from the police and various texts were leaked to Dr. Adrian Zenz, who works at US-based Communism Victims Remembrance Foundation, known for its studies on the concentration camps in East Turkestan. The documents shared by Zenz revealed the facts about the "re-education" camps. The shared documents detail the photographs of thousands of Muslim detainees and the hit-and-kill policy on those trying to escape. According to the documents belonging to the camps where thousands of men and women between the ages of 15 and 75 are detained, the reasons for their arrest include participating in religious conversations, growing a beard, not drinking alcohol, among others. The documents, which probably dates back to 2018, also have photographs that show people in the cells sitting in a single row, looking at the television screen where images of the party leaders displaying, reading texts on papers in their hands. The photos, which might be used for biometric data, appear to be taken under the supervision of armed police and officials. These documents are said to contain photos of more than 5,000 people. It is found that the Chinese administration detained Uighurs because they travelled to countries with a sizeable Muslim population or carried religious symbols. Texts which include speeches of Chen Quanguo, the Communist Party Secretary in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, argued that the people in Xinjiang belong to extremist religious beliefs. It has been recorded that since Quanguo took office in 2016 he has been working hard to strengthen the police force in the region, establish thousands of police stations, and bring the "extremist" people of the region under complete control with cameras placed on all streets.

As a result, these leaked documents prove that the "vocational education and training centers" in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region are not education institutions as claimed by China. In fact, since 2018, witness statements, analysis of satellite images, etc. show that these so-called training camps are prison-like securitized structures. Thanks to unfiltered police documents and footages obtained from the inside, the true nature of these camps is clearly shown for the first time. China's long-standing oppressive policies in East Turkestan depicts how the Beijing administration has personalized its Xinjiang policy with ideological and military dynamics. As Chen Quanguo claims, policies toward Uyghurs -mass arrests, sociocultural assimilation efforts, etc. - have helped establish an ethnically and culturally homogeneous national identity. those policies against the Uyghurs who are the main enemies for the goal of a "stable Xinjiang" aim to provide all kinds of state interventions for the sustainability of the targeted stability. Ultimately, the framing of all ethnic minority groups in Xinjiang as a threat reflects a political paranoia of hysterical threat assessments, as Dirk A. Moses expressed in his journal.

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