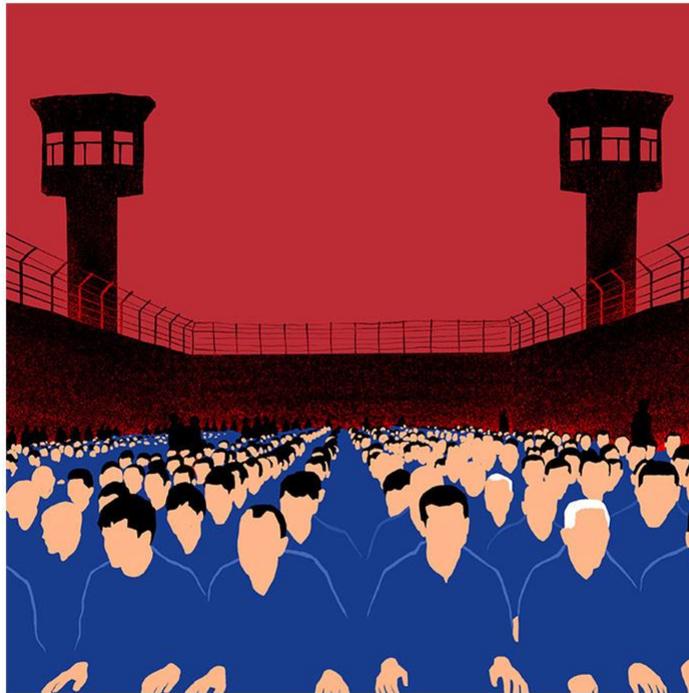




RADIO FREE ASIA

TRAPPED IN THE SYSTEM: EXPERIENCES OF UYGHUR DETENTION IN POST-2015 XINJIANG



INTERVIEWS FROM NOVEMBER 2019 TO MAY 2020

PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH, TRAINING,
AND EVALUATION

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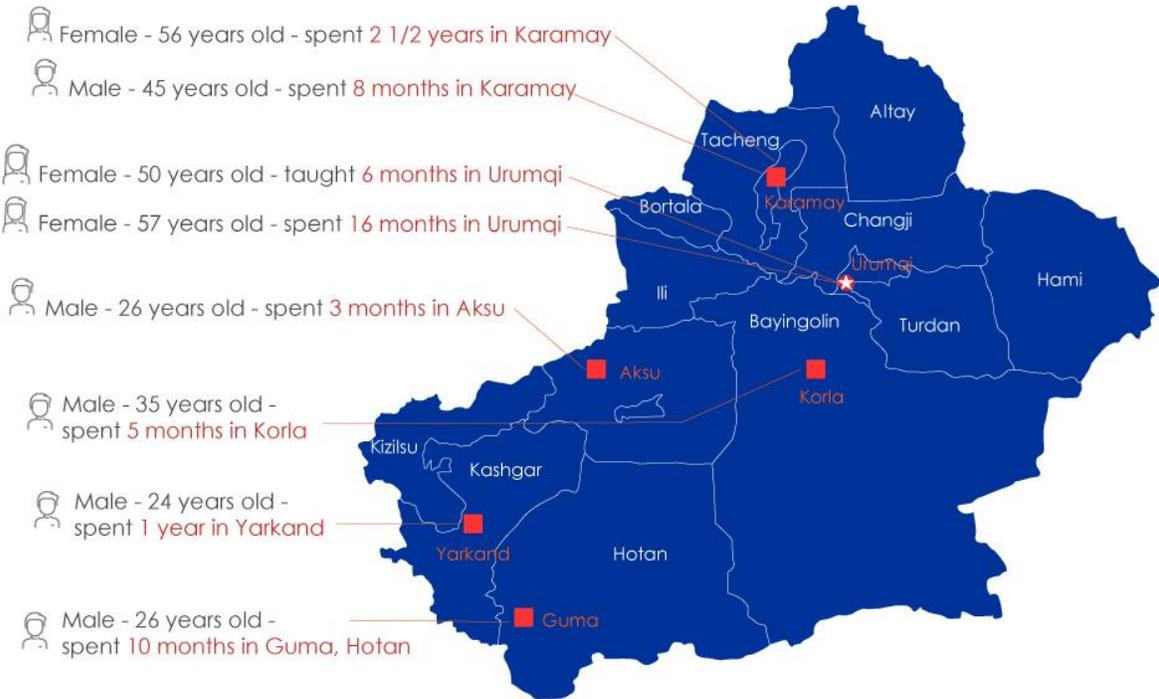
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of in-depth interviews conducted with eight individuals with recent direct experience inside detention facilities in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Findings are based on four face-to-face and four remote interviews conducted between November 2019 and May 2020. Radio Free Asia’s Department of Research, Training, and Evaluation (RTE) managed all aspects of the project. A Europe-based consultant recruited and interviewed qualified participants based primarily in Europe. Seven interviewees were ethnic Uyghurs detained between 2015 and 2019, and the eighth an ethnic Uzbek conscripted to teach in two XUAR re-education facilities in 2017. The research team prioritized establishing trust, ensuring anonymity, and providing secure environments for interviews, which addressed deeply personal and traumatic issues. Interviews lasted between five and 11 hours, with some including long breaks or spanning two days.

As this is a qualitative study, findings are non-representative of Uyghur populations inside the XUAR or abroad. While these participants and their testimonies are among the best available sources of rare information on conditions inside XUAR detention facilities, the extent to which their experiences are reflective of those Uyghurs or Uyghur detainees who remained in the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is not known.



Graphic: RFA

DETENTION EXPERIENCES

Many detainees were unclear about the reasons behind their initial arrests and grappled with why they were targeted. Justifications for detaining interviewees included innocuous differences in appearance or behavior, perceived by the state as indicators of religiosity or Uyghur nationalism. Some got no explanation for their arrests. Two participants heard police directly mention being given quotas or financial incentives for Uyghur arrests. Authorities commonly interpreted international travel, residency, or contacts as indications of Uyghur nationalist sentiment and cause for increased surveillance and arrest. Other behaviors flagged as suspicious included growing a beard, wearing a headscarf, not drinking alcohol, and conducting traditional rituals. Two participants were detained despite holding Kazakh passports.



Graphic: Rebel Pepper, RFA

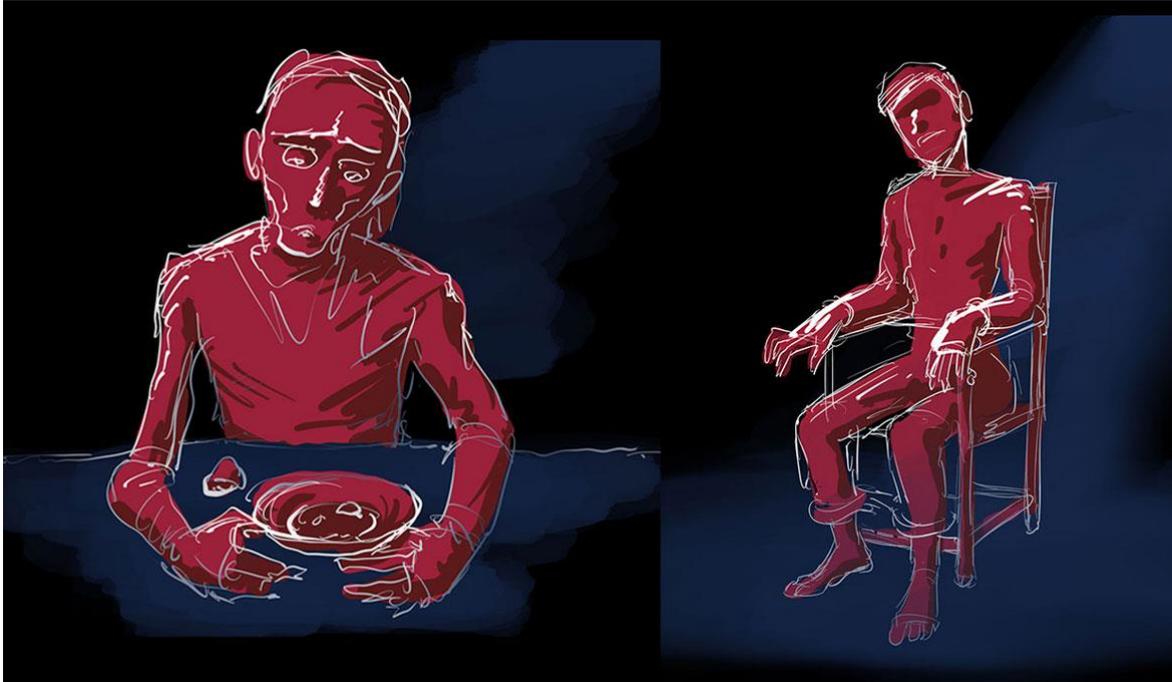
Family behavior was often a determining factor leading to arrest, and three participants described how multiple family members also were swept up in XUAR detention. Interview responses highlighted a system of household classification that appears to mirror categories widely used by Chinese authorities to mark suspicious individuals. Participants suggested they were presumed guilty by association if family members had a history of international experience or perceived religiosity. Three younger male participants from three parts of southwestern Xinjiang said that other family members also had been detained, including a cell phone business owner from Yarkand who said he and his father were arrested at the same time. A teacher from Urumqi said families in her neighborhood were divided into four categories in early 2018: “focus [for investigation],” “untrustworthy,” “ordinary” and “trustworthy.” A

young restaurant owner said his father became itinerant after their Aksu household was labeled as “focused,” avoiding his home for fear of arrest.

Extrajudicial detention within the XUAR is not limited to political re-education camps, but extends to local pre-trial detention facilities. All extrajudicial facilities involve indefinite detention, harsh conditions, threats or presence of extreme violence, and attempts to eradicate Uyghur culture. Scholars have identified seven types of re-education facilities in the XUAR, administered by the courts, public security or the Party apparatus, with names emphasizing goals ranging from “vocational training” to “de-extremification.” Additionally, although PRC law limits pre-trial detention to 37 days, one participant was held for a full year without legal proceedings. Two others remained in pre-trial detention for multiple months. Participants detained in both formal camps and pre-trial detention centers described: severe overcrowding; shackling; forced medical procedures; humiliating policies, conditions, and examinations; physical maltreatment and malnourishment; medical neglect or mistreatment; constant surveillance; restricted communication; and isolation from the outside world.

Strip searches, hair removal, and collection of extensive biometric data characterized the intake process for new detainees. Intrusive medical interventions, especially birth control interventions, were common in detention settings and conducted without detainee consent. Participants described some strip searches taking place in front of members of the opposite sex, with tears and resistance punished by physical and/or verbal abuse. Men’s beards and heads were shaved and women’s hair was cut short. Women were forced to take weekly pills or injections believed to be birth control. Some women were said to have experienced severe hemorrhaging after taking the pill. In addition to regular blood tests, participants mentioned collection of fingerprints, urine samples, facial recognition photography, iris scans, voice prints, and in many cases some form of x-ray or ultrasound.

PRC political indoctrination, forced self-critique, and forced degradation of Uyghur culture were common to both types of detention setting. Participants in both political re-education camps and pre-trial detention centers were required to engage in daily self-criticism and professions of loyalty to the PRC, and daily repudiation of Uyghur culture and identity. Detainees were required to memorize political slogans as well as lists of negative qualities associated with Uyghur nationalists. One said authorities described those who wear headscarves as “smelly” and compared bearded men to animals.



Graphic: Rebel Pepper, RFA

Poor or insufficient food, limited and monitored use of toilets, and physical mistreatment threatened detainee health. Medical neglect was common after initial onboarding procedures. Detainees mentioned particular issues with wounds and infections related to the use of heavy shackles, lack of toilet access, poor hygiene, and severe dehydration. Four interviewees said they had witnessed or knew of prisoners dying from untreated urinary tract infections, heart disease, or the consequences of torture. Participant comments suggest that medical assistance was rare and limited to keeping inmates alive for further interrogation, though there was pressure from legal authorities not to allow inmates to die.

All participants described extreme physical and psychological violence within detention settings, including deaths. The constant threat or presence of extreme violence and torture was discussed by all participants. Violence was used to extract forced confessions, to punish detainees for infractions or mistakes, and as a method of terror and control. Three participants said they had witnessed the death or fatal deterioration of fellow detainees. All participants detained in political re-education camps said they had heard of fellow detainees who had died as a result of violence or maltreatment during their confinement.

Interviewees described lasting negative impacts to their physical and/or mental health as a result of trauma experienced in detention. The violence and psychological torment of detention experiences had clear traumatizing effects on all participants. Chronic pain, high blood pressure, heart pain and problems, and signs of post-traumatic stress such as extreme anxiety, nightmares and depression were mentioned. The experience of witnessing verbal abuse and violence against others was described by many participants as being equally if not more agonizing than their own

experiences. These lasting effects have also been described by other Uyghurs who have spoken with international media and with researchers.



Graphic: Rebel Pepper, RFA

DAILY LIFE BEYOND THE DETENTION SYSTEM

Surveillance in the XUAR has increased dramatically in recent years, as has the sophistication of surveillance methods, which now include official social classification schemes and the increased seizure and use of biometric data. All participants noted an increased use of applied technologies to survey and control Uyghur and Muslim minority populations. They described a surveillance apparatus which features an expanding number of security checkpoints with ID and facial recognition scanners, and said that, outside of formal arrests, authorities had coercively collected biometric data including blood, fingerprints, facial recognition photographs, iris scans, and voice samples. One interviewee was told that only those who submitted biometric data could continue to access government services. **Interviewees suggested that ID and facial scanners set off alerts for “untrustworthy” individuals at checkpoints.**

Interviewees or people they knew were forced to download mobile phone software, which they assumed to be used for government tracking. A few interviewees also suggested that drive-by surveillance vehicles also now track mobile phone calls and internet use. (Qualitative research for RFA’s Korean Service discovered participants mentioning similar surveillance vehicles have been used in North Korea.)

RFA USE ABROAD

Participants valued the accuracy and depth of RFA reports as well as the use of direct sources from inside the XUAR. All participants found the content they listened to or watched over the course of these interviews to be credible and engaging, and participants particularly approved of the inclusion of direct sources and Uyghur voices in the material. Two participants mentioned, out of RFA's overall offerings, the weekly "Nazar" ("Opinion") program as a particular favorite, and two participants found Uyghur Service members Shohret Hoshur and Gulchehra Hoja to be particularly effective reporters and presenters.

Three interviewees avoided discussing some RFA sample segments that may trigger traumatic responses. One participant who had not used RFA before told the interviewer that, although she appreciated RFA telling the world the truth about their situation, she herself avoids any media coverage relating to her experience. Another said that the radio segment on forced labor by former Uyghur camp detainees left her deeply upset and guilt ridden over her inability to help. A young cook from Hotan said he did not like the video about the forced marriage of Uyghurs because it is "really heartbreaking."

Five participants now living in Europe or Turkey are regular RFA users. Of these five, most checked RFA's website, Facebook page, and YouTube channel, accessing both written pieces as well as audio and/or video clips. A few reported that they relied directly on these RFA platforms for their news rather than using a browser to search for news from other outlets. Some participants share links to RFA pieces via Facebook or WhatsApp up to several times a week.

Other than RFA, Istiqlal TV, an online outlet based in Turkey, was the Uyghur news source most commonly accessed by participants. However, most participants felt that RFA's reporting was more objective and subject to a higher journalistic standard than the online-only competitor. One participant reported that Istiqlal sometimes rebroadcasts pieces already produced by RFA.

SUGGESTIONS

Participants recommended that RFA continue to convey the reality of the ongoing repression in the Uyghur region in as transparent and high-profile a way as possible. Participants said that international coverage failed to present the reality of Uyghurs' experiences in the XUAR in sufficient scale and depth. To address this, they recommended that RFA:

- Continue to provide detailed, factually strong reports about conditions within the XUAR, supported by photographic and video materials whenever possible.
- Focus on original reporting rather than translating reports from other outlets.

- Humanize Uyghurs in general and detainees in particular, sharing their real lives and stories, challenging the PRC narrative portraying them as Islamic extremists or terrorists.
- Broadcast more interviews with émigrés who had direct experience of detention – including those who were detained in pre-trial facilities rather than re-education camps.
- Translate content into other languages, including Mandarin and Russian.

To better serve Uyghur audiences, participants recommended that RFA:

- Increase its capacity (specifically the number of Uyghur correspondents) to collect and report exclusive and breaking stories.
- Expand reports on international news and developments relevant to Uyghurs.
- Update the style of its news presentation and better engage young Uyghurs.

Given the pervasiveness of trauma among XUAR Uyghurs, RFA might consider providing trigger warnings on disturbing content, including mental health support in programming, and presenting hopeful elements to difficult stories when possible. Experts on post-traumatic stress and victims' advocacy groups have developed concrete media guidelines that might be helpful in presenting difficult coverage both compellingly and sensitively.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic Uyghurs living under Chinese rule in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) have endured exponential increases in intrusive state control since Beijing's violent crackdown on protests in Urumqi in July 2009. Despite Western condemnation, People's Republic of China (PRC) authorities have doubled down on their longstanding narrative connecting Uyghur people and cultural practices to international Muslim terrorism to justify extreme measures used to monitor and control Uyghur citizens. Beijing has deployed increasingly sophisticated digital surveillance technologies throughout the Uyghur region and harassed and detained more Uyghurs than ever previously. In 2017 and 2018, XUAR courts sentenced some 220,000 people to fixed-term or life imprisonments.¹ However, extrajudicial detentions have dwarfed formal proceedings: since 2015, according to one estimate, as many as 1.5 million Uyghurs have disappeared into a vast array of extrajudicial internment settings.² Other mainstream accounts place the number at three million or more.³

In recent years, these extrajudicial forms of detention have increasingly gained international attention. Most prominent in recent media coverage and international condemnation have been “political re-education” camps, where up to a million Uyghurs may have been detained.⁴ However, Uyghurs in the XUAR also are being detained for varying periods of time in police stations and other pre-trial detention centers: 30% of participants in the Radio Free Asia Uyghur Refugee and Traveler Survey conducted in 2018 had experienced such detention before leaving the country.⁵ Both of these forms of detention, in contrast to prison sentences, make no gesture toward the PRC's legal system: They do not stem from a person being found guilty of a formal crime following a court trial; they emerge from accusations for which no evidence need be produced; they are arbitrary in length; and they can occur in a wide range of facilities.

Chinese prisons are known to be among the world's most brutal.⁶ However, reports by émigrés as well as official documents have suggested that non-prison detention, whether in re-education camps or pre-trial detention centers, also is characterized by physical and psychological maltreatment and violence, as well as political indoctrination and attacks on Uyghur culture. As a consequence, from the point of view of traumatic impacts on detainees, their families, and the Uyghur population as a whole, the distinctions between various forms of detention appear increasingly blurred.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html>

² <https://www.jpolrisk.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiangs-vocational-training-internment-camps/>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-china-concentrationcamps/china-putting-minority-muslims-in-concentration-camps-u-s-says-idUSKCN1S925K>

⁴ <https://new-york-un.diplo.de/un-en/news-corner/201006-heusgen-china/2402648>

⁵ Radio Free Asia Uyghur Refugee and Traveler Survey, June-Sept 2018, n=300, 2019.

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/05/13/tiger-chairs-and-cell-bosses/police-torture-criminal-suspects-china>, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/ex-german-prisoner-exposes-life-in-a-chinese-prison-a-1256413.html>



Armed civilians patrol the area outside the bazaar in the seat of Hotan prefecture, Nov. 3, 2017. Photo: AP

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the Uyghur experiences of detention and how to communicate with Uyghurs inside the XUAR today, in 2019 RFA's Department of Research, Training and Evaluation commissioned a series of qualitative in-depth interviews among participants with recent direct experience inside XUAR detention facilities. All but one of the participants were ethnic Uyghurs. Interviews were conducted with recent émigrés in three European countries and in Turkey between November 2019 and May 2020.

Participants were recruited by a native-speaking Uyghur consultant able to locate appropriate interviewees among Uyghur exile communities in three European countries and Turkey. The first four interviews were conducted face-to-face. However, after both regions locked down because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the project shifted to remote virtual interviews. Recruitment efforts focused on former Uyghur detainees but expanded to include an ethnic Uzbek teacher who had worked in two XUAR re-education camps over a period of more than six months. A total of eight participants were interviewed in secure and private locations or via secure remote online video connection. Details about the participants include:

- Seven of the study's eight interviewees were ethnic Uyghurs who had been detained for periods ranging from three months to two and a half years.
 - One detainee was an ethnic Uyghur citizen of Kazakhstan who had never held PRC citizenship; another was an ethnic Uyghur who had immigrated to Kazakhstan and held dual citizenship and a PRC passport.

- The eighth interviewee, an ethnic Uzbek, was married to an ethnic Uyghur and had been conscripted to act as a teacher of Mandarin in two re-education camps.
- Four detainees were detained, either for the first or most recent time, in 2017; one in 2016; and two in 2015. The teacher was forcibly enlisted in 2017.
- The most recently released participant was let go in July 2019; three were released in 2018, and the remaining three released in 2017 or earlier. The teacher also was relieved of her duties in 2017.

Participant demographic profiles and their detention or camp experiences

Participant demographic profiles and their detention or camp experiences.

	<p>Citizenship at time of detention: PRC Hometown in XUAR: Aksu Occupation: Restaurant owner Education: Middle school Date left XUAR: Nov 2016 Camp/ facility Location: Aksu Total period in detention/camp system: Three months (July - October 2015)</p>		<p>Citizenship at time of detention: PRC Hometown in XUAR: Urumqi Occupation: Teacher Education: University Date left XUAR: Oct 2019 Camp/ facility Location: Urumqi Total period in detention/camp system: Teacher in camps approximately six months (February - August 2017)</p>
	<p>Citizenship at time of detention: Kazakhstan / PRC Hometown in XUAR: Karamay Occupation: Chef Education: Vocational college Date left XUAR: Nov 2017 Camp/ facility Location: Karamay Total period in detention/camp system: Eight months (March - October 2017)</p>		<p>Citizenship at time of detention: Kazakhstan Hometown : Almaty Occupation: Accountant Education: University Date left XUAR: Sept 2017 Camp/ facility Location: Urumqi Total period in detention/camp system: 16 months (May 2017 - September 2018)</p>
	<p>Citizenship at time of detention: PRC Hometown in XUAR: Korla Occupation: Businessman Education: Middle school Date left XUAR: Jun 2017 Camp/ facility Location: Korla Total period in detention/camp system: Approximately five months over two stretches (2015-16 and 2017)</p>		<p>Citizenship at time of detention: PRC Hometown in XUAR: Yarkand Occupation: Cell phone business owner Education: Middle school Date left XUAR: April 2017 Camp/ facility Location: Yarkand Total period in detention/camp system: Arrested 9 times between 2013-2016, longest detention August 2015 - August 2016</p>
	<p>Citizenship at time of detention: PRC Hometown in XUAR: Karamay Occupation: Engineer Education: University Date left XUAR: Aug 2019 Camp/ facility Location: Karamay Total period in detention/camp system: Two and a half years (Dec 2016 - July 2019)</p>		<p>Citizenship at time of detention: PRC Hometown in XUAR: Hotan Occupation: Cook Education: Middle school Date left XUAR: Jan 2018 Camp/ facility Location: Guma, Hotan Total period in detention/camp system: 10 months (March 2017 - Jan 2018)</p>



Interviews covered deeply personal and difficult issues, and ranged from five to 11 hours. Some interviews included long breaks or spanned two days, giving priority to the care of individuals who had endured traumatic experiences. In pursuing detailed information from these recent detention survivors, the interviewer probed topics without following a rigid script, allowing participants to provide their organic testimonies as they felt compelled to share them.

The accounts offered by this study's participants supplement other firsthand accounts as well as leaked documents and cables detailing the PRC's extensive programs of surveillance and control of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities inside the XUAR and PRC.⁷

As these interviews are qualitative in nature, all findings are statistically non-representative of Uyghurs or Uyghur detainees still inside the XUAR.

⁷ <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/exposed-chinas-operating-manuals-for-mass-internment-and-arrest-by-algorithm/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-detention-camp.html>; <https://www.lapresse.ca/international/asie-et-oceanie/2019-12-01/repression-des-ouighours-les-survivants-de-l-horreur>; <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-08/uyghur-woman-details-life-inside-chinese-re-education-camp/10697044>; <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html>

MAIN FINDINGS

Surveillance and arrests in the XUAR

Surveillance

As noted by a wide range of government, non-government and media reports outside the PRC, Chinese government monitoring and control of the XUAR Uyghur population has dramatically increased in recent years, particularly since 2014.⁸ An RFA survey of Uyghur refugees in 2018 found that surveillance had ramped up significantly from around 2016 onward: nearly all (97%) of that survey's participants reported having been searched at a random street checkpoint, and 89.7% had had their fingerprints, blood or saliva collected.⁹

All participants in this study confirmed that Uyghurs within the XUAR live with omnipresent, highly intrusive surveillance. One participant in this study said that he noticed a dramatic upsurge in security between visits from Kazakhstan in 2016 and in March 2017, when he was arrested.¹⁰ All participants said that checkpoints with ID scanners and facial recognition technology have expanded steadily across the region in recent years; some news reports indicate that there can be four to five checkpoints every kilometer in some areas.¹¹ Several participants described swipeable ID cards and facial recognition scanners that set off alerts at checkpoints if a person is considered suspicious or has a security record. One participant described numerous checkpoints near her home in Urumqi:

There were checkpoints at every bus stop. For example, the left side of my home is the Bianjiang Hotel and the right side is Yanan Road. There are police boxes in both the station and across the street from the station. And there were military cars – one in front of the Bianjiang Hotel and another at Consul Street and the Grand Bazaar. There were bars in front of the checkpoints. I think they have checkpoints in the underground street underpass. At the checkpoints are six Uyghur police and six Han soldiers. They only check Uyghurs.¹²

A few participants also said that drive-by surveillance has also been on the rise, with Uyghurs believing that surveillance vehicles can track phone calls and internet use. (It is noteworthy that North Korean defector participants in a 2016 qualitative research project

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/world/asia/china-surveillance-xinjiang.html>

⁹ Radio Free Asia Uyghur Refugee and Traveler Survey, June-Sept 2018, n=300, 2019.

¹⁰ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹¹ <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2018/05/31/china-has-turned-xinjiang-into-a-police-state-like-no-other>

¹² Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

conducted for RFA's and Voice of America's Korean services also mentioned surveillance vehicles used to track mobile phone signals.¹³⁾

To feed this information system, all participants noted, the collection of biometric information from Uyghurs across the XUAR has become routine. For example, one participant from Urumqi said that in April 2017, she and others received WeChat messages instructing all local residents to present themselves for blood tests, fingerprinting, facial recognition photography and iris scans;¹⁴ without these results, they were told, they would not be able to receive any services from their neighborhood administration. Another participant said that in Yarkand, authorities started collecting all of these, plus voice samples for voice recognition, in 2015.¹⁵ As noted in news and NGO reports,¹⁶ authorities also have increasingly used XUAR residents' own communications devices to track their movements and conversations; a few participants said that they or people that they knew had been given cell phones or told to download applications that they presumed were used for tracking.

Several participants also noted enforced birth control targeting Uyghur women in the XUAR. For example, the camp teacher from Urumqi described being herself fitted with a mandatory birth control ring under unsanitary conditions in 2017. This was a practice that she said took place throughout Urumqi, with women being told that without a doctor's slip showing that they had a ring, they would not be able to receive official services.¹⁷

All participants with family members who had traveled abroad or who had reputations as religious or politically minded people said that they were aware that they were subject to special attention from police. Leaked documents indicate that PRC authorities consider family behavior to be key in determining an individual's "trustworthiness," and that having a family member residing abroad is a major trigger for surveillance and detention.¹⁸ Four participants said that other family members had been arrested before

My brother was detained because they thought he had extremist intentions because he had a beard and prayed.

-Male businessman from Korla, 35, left XUAR in 2017

¹³ Advanced Domestic Cell Phone Use in North Korea, May 2016, conducted for the Broadcasting Board of Governors by InterMedia Survey Institute.

¹⁴ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019. The participant also made reference to "lung tests;" these have not been identified.

¹⁵ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

¹⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/technology/china-uyghurs-hackers-malware-hackers-smartphones.html>;

<https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2019/05/02/china-how-mass-surveillance-works-xinjiang>

¹⁷ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

¹⁸ <https://www.jpolarisk.com/karakax/>

their own arrests, either because of suspected religiosity (“My brother was detained because they thought he had extremist intentions because he had a beard and prayed,” one participant said¹⁹) or because they had traveled abroad. By the same token, one participant, born in the XUAR but now a resident of Kazakhstan, said that his relatives in the XUAR had been arrested after his detention, and that his father had died in a camp.²⁰

Arrests

As of 2019, Xinjiang had experienced a record surge in arrests over the previous two years. An extensive 2019 *New York Times* analysis of official Chinese data found that XUAR arrests in 2017 were more than eight times higher than in the previous year: nearly a quarter million people (227,261) were arrested in 2017, and an additional 114,023 were arrested in 2018. Total arrests over these two years were more than 70% higher than the cumulative total for the previous 10 years.²¹ The *Times* analysis found that Xinjiang accounted for less than 2% of the PRC’s population in 2017, but 21% of arrests.²² As one participant said of the mood in Aksu in 2015, “People were terrified.

*I heard before that there was a camp, but I didn't
imagine that it was so bad.*

-Female accountant from Almaty, 57, left XUAR in 2017

Even before I was arrested, the husbands of our neighbors were arrested and sentenced.”²³ Three of the study’s participants had been arrested and held briefly prior to their period of detention, and a few participants said that in recent years, Uyghurs had begun to understand that arrest could lead to internment in a re-education camp. “I heard before that there was a camp, but I didn’t imagine that it was so bad,” said one participant.²⁴

Most participants said that the arrest that led to their detention came as a surprise to them, despite worsening conditions in the region and the prior experiences of some. One participant said that she was called back to the PRC from abroad in order to file retirement papers, then arrested a few hours later;²⁵ another was a Kazakh national;²⁶ a third held dual Kazakh/PRC citizenship; a fourth was arrested despite having connections to the security apparatus.²⁷

¹⁹ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

²⁰ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

²¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html>

²² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html>

²³ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

²⁴ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

²⁵ Female, 56, Karamay, engineer, left XUAR Aug 2019.

²⁶ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

²⁷ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

*Our family has been registered as a “focused family.”
My father was not safe at home, and most of the time
he was traveling between Urumqi and Aksu.*

-Male restaurant owner from Aksu, 26, left XUAR in 2016

In line with the guidelines laid out in leaked documents,²⁸ participants said that stated grounds for arrest include a range of accusations, in some cases dating back a number of years. In some instances these accusations related to the participants themselves. In others, they related to members of their family: three participants said that, in recent years, authorities have begun to classify Uyghur families according to their political reliability, and to extend suspicions to all family members. The terms “focus” or “focused” (重点 zhongdian) were used to describe individuals particularly singled out for monitoring and control, with other categories considered less extreme. At the other end of the spectrum, “safe” (放心 fangxin) individuals were considered loyal to the PRC. One participant said that in her Urumqi neighborhood in early 2018, “families were divided into four categories: focused families, untrustworthy families, trustworthy families, and ordinary families.”²⁹ Another said, “Our family has been registered as a ‘focused’ family. My father was not safe at home, and most of the time he was traveling between Urumqi and Aksu.”³⁰

These accounts tally with a classification scheme described by scholar Adrian Zenz, where work teams in the XUAR were told to break local households into four categories: two different types of “focus households” (“key work” households (zhongdian gongzuo hu, 重点工作户) or “key control” households (zhongdian guankong hu, 重点管控户)), “basic” or “average” households (jiben hu, 基本户), and “trustworthy” households (fangxin hu, 放心户).³¹ Meanwhile, multiple PRC documents use categorization schemes for Uyghur individuals using almost identical language, with different sources identifying the categories as “focus persons” (zhongdian ren, 重点人), “ordinary persons” (yiban ren, 一般人员) or “trustworthy persons” (fangxin ren, 放心人), or “untrustworthy persons” (bufangxin ren, 不放心人).³²

²⁸ <https://www.ipolrisk.com/karakax/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/world/asia/china-reeducation-camps-leaked.html>

²⁹ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

³⁰ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

³¹ <https://www.ipolrisk.com/karakax/>

³² <https://www.ipolrisk.com/karakax/>; <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-story-of-chinese-muslims-is-a-story-that-has-global-implications-qa-with-filmmakers/>

They have to arrest 150 Uyghurs every day. That is why they search your mobile phone tirelessly. It just depends on your luck. If you check out safely at the first checkpoint, you can be arrested at the second...

-Female teacher from Urumqi, 50, left XUAR in 2019

Most accusations related directly or indirectly to:

- Religiosity. While religious leaders, people who are known to have studied or taught Islam, and people who have gone on the Hajj are prime targets, grounds for detention include grooming (beards, headscarves, ablutions); use of traditional greetings common to the Islamic world (“assalamu alaykum,” meaning “peace be with you”); abstention from tobacco and/or alcohol; conduct of family rituals (marriages, funerals); possession of verses from the Qur’an; and having relatives or associates who are religious. One participant, for instance, said that his family was a “focused” family because his grandfather had taught Islam to children and his father permitted Uyghur women working in his restaurant to wear headscarves if they wished.³³
- Uyghur nationalist sentiments. Indicators of the latter included possession of images deemed to be nationalist in character. One participant was questioned about a photograph of a family member at a Uyghur gathering holding the blue East Turkestan flag. Another was once detained for having a drawing of a horse with a line from the Qur’an. Others were questioned for having links abroad, which were deemed to be a sign of disloyalty to the PRC at best and a desire to pursue terrorist associations at worst. Actions raising suspicions of Uyghur nationalism include applying for a passport, traveling outside the country, being in contact with persons abroad, having family members abroad, or living abroad themselves.³⁴ Two participants, for instance, had siblings overseas; one had traveled to Turkey, and one to Egypt; one had moved to France to join her husband; one had moved to Kazakhstan; and one was a Kazakh citizen traveling to the XUAR on business. One participant believed that there was a special police team in Hotan tasked with questioning people who had been abroad.³⁵

In some cases, however, no grounds for arrest were ever given. Several participants strongly denied having ever engaged in suspicious activities, suggesting that security

³³ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

³⁴ <https://www.jpolicy.com/karakax/>; <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/world/asia/china-reeducation-camps-leaked.html>

³⁵ Male, 26, Hotan, cook, left XUAR Jan 2018.

forces may be under pressure to meet quotas for arrests on the simple basis of Uyghur ethnicity, rather than responding to actual behavior.³⁶

“I heard that they have a quota,” said one Urumqi interviewee. “They have to arrest 150 Uyghurs every day. That is why they search your mobile phone at every checkpoint tirelessly. It just depends on your luck. If you check out safely at the first checkpoint, you can be arrested at the second checkpoint. We can’t ask the reason.”³⁷

All participants described the process of arrest as a further opportunity for collection of a range of biometric information. Between them, participants mentioned collection of fingerprints, blood and urine samples, facial recognition photography, iris scans, voice prints, and in many cases some form of x-ray or ultrasound.

All participant described the experience of arrest as terrifying. “I was almost peeing my pants with fear, I was in such a state of panic that my whole body was shaking,” one participant said.³⁸

Detention in the XUAR

The detention environment in the XUAR

In the XUAR, as across the PRC, people sentenced to fixed-term or life imprisonment as well as to death are housed in prisons (*jianyu*),³⁹ overseen by the Ministry of Justice.⁴⁰ In 2017, Xinjiang courts sentenced almost 87,000 defendants to criminal punishments; in 2018, 133,198 people were sentenced.⁴¹ Of those sentenced in 2017, 87% were sentenced to prison terms of 5 years or longer.⁴²

Imprisonment as part of criminal punishment, however, is only one facet of detention in the XUAR. According to one estimate, as of July 2019, 1.5 million Uyghurs and Muslim minorities – 12.5% of the XUAR’s official Uyghur population of 12 million – were or had been interned in some form of extrajudicial internment, whether in pre-trial detention centers or in a range of extrajudicial internment facilities roughly grouped under the label of re-education camps.⁴³ Previous RFA research offers a snapshot of detentions among 300 Uyghurs who had left the XUAR: While the sample was not representative of Uyghur populations inside the XUAR, nearly a third (30.7%) of participants in RFA’s 2018 Uyghur Refugee and Traveler Survey reported having been detained for up to 12

³⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/08/world/asia/china-uyghur-muslim-detention-camp.html>

³⁷ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

³⁸ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

³⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs#>

⁴⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penal_system_in_China; <https://translate.google.com/translate>

⁴¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html>

⁴² <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/31/world/asia/xinjiang-china-uyghurs-prisons.html>

⁴³ <https://www.jpolorisk.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiangs-vocational-training-internment-camps/>

months, and 1.3% had been detained for 12 months or longer; 4% had been sent to re-education centers.

The range of extrajudicial internment facilities includes:

- Pre-trial detention centers (*kanshousuo* 看守所), overseen by the Ministry of Public Security.⁴⁴ They are legally authorized to house criminal suspects for up to 37 days, as well as to house people on short (less than three months) sentences.⁴⁵ However, in recent years they increasingly have been used for longer-term internment without formal charges and for political indoctrination.⁴⁶
- Political re-education centers or camps, which appear to have had no basis in PRC law at least as recently as 2018, according to legal scholars.⁴⁷ Operationally, they appear to fall under the purview of the XUAR's Political and Legal Affairs Commission, the Community Party committee responsible for security matters in the XUAR.⁴⁸ More than 1,000 of these centers are estimated to exist across Xinjiang.⁴⁹ They include:
 1. Centralized transformation through education training centers (*jizhong jiaoyu zhuanhua peixun zhongxin* 集中教育转化培训中心)
 2. De-extremification transformation through education bases (*qujiduanhua jiaoyu zhuanhua jidi* 去极端化教育转化基地)
 3. Transformation through education and correction centers (*jiaoyu zhuanhua ji jiaozhi zhongxin* 教育转化及矫治中心)
 4. Legal system schools or legal system training schools (*fazhi xuexiao* 法制学校 or *fazhi peixun xuexiao* 法制培训学校)
 5. Court system transformation through education centers (*sifaju jiaoyu zhuanhua peixun zhongxin* 司法局教育转化培训中心)
 6. Centralized closed education training centers (*jizhong fengbi jiaoyu peixun zhongxin* 集中封闭教育培训中心)
 7. Vocational skills education training centers (*zhiye jineng jiaoyu peixun zhongxin* 职业技能教育培训中心), or educational training centers (*jiaoyu peixun zhongxin* 教育培训中心).⁵⁰

⁴⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Penal_system_in_China

⁴⁵ <https://translate.google.com/translate>

⁴⁶ <https://www.jpolarisk.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiangs-vocational-training-internment-camps/>

⁴⁷ <https://www.lawfareblog.com/no-new-xinjiang-legislation-does-not-legalize-detention-centers>

⁴⁸ <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/exposed-chinas-operating-manuals-for-mass-internment-and-arrest-by-algorithm/>

⁴⁹ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/zenz-11122019161147.html>

⁵⁰ <https://www.jpolarisk.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiangs-vocational-training-internment-camps/>

The independent think tank Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Xinjiang Data Project, using satellite photography, has divided these facilities into four tiers, ranging from least secure (Tiers 1 and 2, often schools or other civilian structures converted into detention centers through the construction of internal fencing and perimeter walls) to most secure (Tiers 3 and 4, focused on detention and featuring high concrete walls, extensive barbed wire, watch towers and often cell blocks).⁵¹

Tier	Number (2020)	Description ⁵²
Tier 1	108	<i>Suspected low-security re-education facilities:</i> These are detention facilities that were created by adding fencing and other security features to existing buildings such as schools and hospitals when the crackdown began in 2017. While many likely still house detainees, they are often directly connected to large factory facilities, suggesting an element of forced labor. State media reports suggest that detainees in this tier of facilities have been allowed to visit their homes on weekends. Some have had walls lowered or murals painted, and recreational facilities such as ping-pong tables or basketball courts added. Camps toured by diplomats and journalists are typically within this tier.
Tier 2	94	<i>Suspected re-education facilities:</i> These facilities have significantly more security than those in Tier 1, including high barbed-wire fencing, a perimeter wall and watchtowers. However, they still have classrooms and external yards for detainees; and their purpose appears to be the eventual "rehabilitation" of detainees rather than indefinite confinement. Many of these facilities also have large factory warehouses within them or adjacent to them.
Tier 3	72	<i>Suspected detention facilities:</i> The only access to these high-security sites is typically through a well-guarded main gate and often a single bridge or fenced tunnel leading up to the perimeter wall and watchtowers. Many of these facilities have up to six layers of barbed wire fencing and perimeter walls. Administrative buildings are completely separate from detainee areas, in contrast with less secure facilities that have administrative buildings scattered between the dormitory and classroom buildings.
Tier 4	107	<i>Suspected maximum-security prisons:</i> The dataset only includes prisons which have significantly expanded or been newly built since 2017. These facilities have a distinctive architecture: high walls, multiple layers of perimeter barriers, watchtowers, dozens of cell blocks, no apparent outside exercise yards for detainees, single bridge entry for guards to the perimeter wall. These facilities are often co-located with other (lower security) detention facilities.

Analysis by the Institute, which was established by the Australian government and is funded by both public and private monies, suggests that although some dismantling of lower-security facilities may have occurred in 2020, Tier 3 and Tier 4 facilities have undergone and continue to undergo significant new construction and expansion.⁵³

The experiences of all of this study's participants took place in these contexts, whether as detainees or (in one case) as a teacher forced into participation.

Pre-trial detention facilities versus re-education camps

Three of the seven former detainees had been held in local pre-trial detention centers for the entire time of their detention. Four, after their initial arrest, had been transferred to re-education camps.

⁵¹ <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/explainers/exploring-xinjiangs-detention-facilities/>

⁵² <https://xjdp.aspi.org.au/explainers/exploring-xinjiangs-detention-facilities/>

⁵³ <https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-24/china-building-bigger-uyghur-detention-camps-in-xinjiang/12693338>

Participant	Total period detained	Location of pre-trial detention center	Location of re-education camp
1	Three months (July - October 2015)	Aksu city detention center	Between Aksu and Uchturpan
2	Eight months (March - October 2017)	Pichan county jail/Karamay jail	Somewhere near Karamay
3	Approximately five months over two stretches (2015-16 and 2017)	Korla Charbagh Rural Defense, Korla Yehisheher Addiction Treatment Center	(not in camp)
4	Two and a half years (Dec 2016 - July 2019)	Karamay Detention Center	Jeren Bulak, Karamay
5	Teacher in camps approximately six months (February - August 2017)	(Not arrested)	Teacher in Sangfanggo, Hongmiaozi camps (six months, one week, respectively)
6	16 months (May 2017 - September 2018)	Urumqi	Urumqi
7	Arrested 9 times between 2013-2016, longest detention August 2015 - August 2016	Damsey township, Yarkand	(not in camp)
8	10 months (March 2017 - Jan 2018)	Guma jail, Hotan jail, Hotan Security Bureau	(not in camp)

From the point of view of the impact on detainees, the distinctions between these different forms of detention were to a large degree blurred. From the experience of participants in this study who were detained, both of these forms of detention involve, with only small variations:

- Periods of detention without fixed time limits, with the prospect of indefinite detention a constant threat. One participant was in a pre-trial detention center for over a year; another was in a re-education camp for less than two months.
- Harsh physical conditions; maltreatment, medical neglect and non-consensual medical interventions.
- Political indoctrination and Uyghur cultural cleansing;
- The presence or threat of extreme violence (see below).

With the exception of the cultural cleansing directed specifically at Uyghurs, all of these conditions have also been described in the context of PRC prisons outside the XUAR.⁵⁴

Physical conditions in detention facilities

There were too many people for such a small space; there was not enough space to sleep. Some people even slept on the steps of the toilet.

-Male restaurant owner from Aksu, 26, left XUAR in 2016

⁵⁴ <https://www.ft.com/content/db8b9e36-1119-11e8-940e-08320fc2a277>

Participants said that all facilities – both pre-trial detention centers and re-education camps – subjected prisoners to most of the following, with slight variations:

- Severely overcrowded and humiliating conditions. All participants said that their cells, whether in pre-trial detention centers or re-education camps and whatever their size, were filled beyond capacity, with inadequate space for sleeping or moving around; toilets were not private from other detainees. “There were too many people for such a small space; there was not enough space to sleep. Some people even slept on the steps of the toilet,” said one participant.⁵⁵ Another participant said that the women in her cell took turns sleeping in two-hour shifts.⁵⁶
- Constant surveillance. Leaked documents show that detention facilities are to have no “blind spots” outside the vision of surveillance cameras,⁵⁷ and all participants said that all cells and toilet areas contained video cameras in constant operation. “There is a loudspeaker, it can pick up the sound; they would know if we are speaking Uyghur,” one participant said.⁵⁸

The descriptions of the physical environment in re-education camps – small cells facing onto corridors with locked doors, barred windows and ubiquitous cameras, including in the open internal toilets – mesh with video footage reported to be of a camp under construction at Yingye’er, XUAR.⁵⁹

*There is a loudspeaker, it can [also] pick up sound;
they would know if we are speaking Uyghur.*

-Female accountant from Almaty, 57, left XUAR in 2017

Treatment in detention facilities

Participants said that all facilities – both pre-trial detention centers and re-education camps – subjected prisoners to most of the following as well, again with slight variations between facilities and individuals:

- Humiliating processing and routine examinations, including strip searching of both men and women, even in front of members of the opposite sex; enforced shaving of the head and beard for men and cutting of hair for women; and an

⁵⁵ Male, 23, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁵⁶ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁵⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02634937.2018.1507997?journalCode=ccas20>

⁵⁸ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁵⁹ <https://bitterwinter.org/exclusive-video-transformation-through-education-camp-for-uyghurs-exposed-in-xinjiang/>

intrusive medical exam, including blood sampling. “They checked us with all our clothes off. Three military men stood at the door with weapons, because the door was open they were watching us. We cried in embarrassment, the young girls cried and they beat them with an electric rod,” said one participant.⁶⁰ Another participant described being told to strip when he arrived at the detention center: “When I was told to remove my pants, my face showed that I was angry. The police said, ‘Son of a bitch, take your clothes off and don’t change your expression.’”⁶¹

- Shackling. While not all participants had been shackled, shackles were described as common to routine in both pre-trial detention centers and re-education camps. One participant said that she was restrained continuously with five-kilogram shackles for one year, three months and ten days.⁶² Participants said that abrasions from heavy shackles frequently became infected; the business owner from Yarkand said that when he tried to protect the wounds from his shackles with a bit of his pants, guards beat him severely.
- Particularly in re-education camps, frequency and duration of bathroom visits were very limited, which participants said led many detainees to kidney and intestinal damage. In pre-trial detention facilities, cells were more likely to contain a toilet, although these lacked privacy, were not properly ventilated and sometimes did not flush.
- Enforced medical interventions, including weekly blood collection (to check for major illness, one participant was told) and weekly unidentified injections (according to different participants, calcium and/or contraceptives for women) and tablets. Female participants noted that women were forced weekly to take what was believed to be a birth control pill, and that some women experienced hemorrhages as a consequence, in some cases fatal.
- Physical maltreatment, including being forced to work in the sun without water or shade; being forced to run and engage in calisthenics; painful sleep positions and sleep deprivation; exposure to heat and cold; and enforced sitting, standing or kneeling for extended periods, leading to swollen extremities, ulcerations and pain in the back and joints. “Your quilt is thin and your bones hurt,” said one participant.⁶³ “My hips were bruised [from sleeping on the ground]. Our backs hurt and our feet were swollen [from extended sitting],” said another.⁶⁴
- Malnourishment due to limited portions of un nourishing food, deprivation of food as punishment. One participant said that after she and her cellmates were unable to eat undercooked bread, officials said that they clearly weren’t hungry and gave

⁶⁰ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁶¹ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

⁶² Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁶³ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

⁶⁴ Female, 56, Karamay, engineer, left XUAR Aug 2019.

them nothing but water for a week.⁶⁵ Another said that relatives tried to bring food, but that this was confiscated by guards and left to rot or given to dogs. “Many times people asked, ‘Can’t we eat it, please?’ [The guards said] ‘Your stomach can’t digest it, you’ll die from eating it; you’re all here to eat happily and thankfully whatever we give you bastards.’”⁶⁶ One participant mentioned losing nearly 30 pounds in two weeks.⁶⁷

- Medical neglect and mistreatment. Detention centers, prisons and camps rarely appear to have a doctor on site, and with the exception of onboarding procedures, routine care and exams are rare to nonexistent. Wounds, infections, and other medical conditions brought on by abrasive shackles, crowded and unhygienic conditions, enforced immobility, lack of toilet access, poor diet, lack of hydration, and violence/torture are not treated until they become life-threatening. Inmates with life-threatening chronic conditions such as high blood pressure and heart conditions receive routine medications but not check-ups. Medical assistance in emergencies arrives slowly if at all. Four participants said that they had witnessed or knew of prisoners dying from untreated urinary tract infections, heart disease, or the consequences of torture. “I had never heard that urethritis could kill someone, but one man died because of that,” the participant who had been a teacher said.⁶⁸ Another participant echoed this, noting that medical care was designed primarily to prolong interrogation: “There are doctors, but they only treat people so that they can be beaten again.”⁶⁹
- Severing of contact with the outside world. All participants all said that communication with the outside world was strictly forbidden in detention centers and re-education facilities alike. The participant who had been a teacher in two re-education camps in Urumqi said that although detainees whispered requests to her to let their families know that they were alive, she did not dare to do so; she said that two teachers who had passed information about prisoners at Dawanqing re-education camp to their families had been sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment.⁷⁰

All of the study’s participants described highly regimented daily routines in detention centers and re-education camps alike, a situation confirmed by official documents emphasizing behavior management in the camps.⁷¹ As noted above, some of these routines (for example rules around toilet breaks) led to physical harm to detainees.

⁶⁵ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁶⁶ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁶⁷ Female, 56, Karamay, engineer, left XUAR Aug 2019.

⁶⁸ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

⁶⁹ Male, 26, Hotan, cook, left XUAR Jan 2018.

⁷⁰ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

⁷¹ “Strengthen the student’s daily life behavior norms, and implement behavior norms and discipline requirements for getting up, roll call, washing, going to the toilet, organizing and housekeeping, eating, studying, sleeping, closing the door, and so forth. Increase the discipline and punishment of behavioral violations.” <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558510-China-Cables-Telegram-English.html>

- Any violation of these routines, participants said, can be the trigger for punishment: one participant, for instance, described the abuse meted out by re-education camp guards for an incorrectly made bed as so severe that inmates slept on their quilts, rather than under them, to try to keep them properly tucked in.⁷²

Several participants noted that different facilities appeared to have different and sometimes capricious approaches to some issues, with no clear pattern emerging between pre-trial detention centers and re-education camps. For instance, a few participants said that inmates could use cash, whether money that they had brought with them or a small facility allowance, to buy food for sale in the facility or to purchase permission for family members to drop off food; a few also said, however, that money or food were sometimes confiscated or withheld regardless.

Detention as a site of political indoctrination and cultural cleansing

Participants in this study observed that political indoctrination, forced self-criticism, and repudiation of Uyghur culture are not limited to re-education camps, but are now a part of detention in other settings as well. In both pre-trial detention facilities and re-education camps, participants were compelled to:

- Engage in daily political self-criticism and professions of loyalty to the PRC. Participants were required undergo self-criticism for alleged past wrongs against the PRC; to memorize and recite lists of qualities of people disloyal to the PRC; to memorize and recite patriotic slogans; and to memorize and sing patriotic songs. “Every day we learned that without the Party, there will be no China. We learned to sing the ‘Five Star Red Flag’ song and the Rule of the Three Inseparables: The minorities are inseparable from the Han, the Han are inseparable from the minorities, the minorities are inseparable from the minorities,” said one participant.⁷³
- Engage in daily repudiation of Uyghur culture and identity. Participants were required to memorize and recite lists of alleged qualities of Uyghur nationalists; to denounce and renounce expressions of Uyghur culture in grooming and dress; and to learn alternate histories of the region that privileged other heritages (Mongol, for instance) over Uyghur history. “They made comments like: people who wear the headscarf are smelly, and those with beards are not like human

If you have a beard or pray or even if you set your clock to Urumqi time, they accuse you of having mental problems, or tell you that your mind is poisoned.

-Male chef from Almaty/Karamay, 45, left XUAR in 2017

⁷² Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁷³ Female, 56, Karamay, engineer, left XUAR Aug 2019.

beings,” one participant said.⁷⁴ “If you have a beard or pray or even if you set your clock to Urumqi time, they accuse you of having mental problems, or tell you that your mind is poisoned,” said another.⁷⁵

Although all participants said that the food in detention was not halal and one participant described being disgusted by the scent of pork fed to Han Chinese fellow detainees, no participant described being forced to knowingly eat pork.

Violence in detention facilities

All participants described violence – whether as part of interrogation, as a punishment, or as a tool of terror – as being commonplace in both pre-trial detention centers and re-education camps.

Physical violence. All participants described extensive use of extreme violence and torture in detention centers and prisons to extract forced confessions to a range of offenses relating to Uyghur nationalism or religious extremism. Extreme violence and torture also appear common as punishments for infractions of behavioral rules or for failure to correctly memorize songs or slogans. Participants described themselves and others as having been subjected to many of the forms of torture catalogued by the International Society for Human Rights and Amnesty International, such as severe beatings, including with electric batons and with rubber straps designed not to leave marks; twisting and overstretching of limbs, including through specific instruments of torture such as the “iron/tiger chair”; forced abidance in painful positions; hanging; electroshocks; hunger and thirst; and isolation in painful conditions.⁷⁶ “We cried ‘Oh Lord, oh Father, have mercy on me,’ ” said one participant.⁷⁷

They are very frightened of people with high blood pressure and heart disease. There is tension between the security bureau and the courts; they oppose each other. If a prisoner dies because of the police, because of the guards, it will be recorded.

-Male businessman from Korla, 35, left XUAR in 2017

⁷⁴ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁷⁵ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

⁷⁶ While other accounts detail cases of rape or sexual violence in detention, no participants in this study made overt mention of these. <https://dev.ishr.org/torture-methods-in-the-peoples-republic-of-china/>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2015/11/torture-in-china-who-what-why-and-how/>

⁷⁷ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

The accounts of two participants suggested that facilities may be under some pressure not to kill inmates. One participant said, “If detainees faint or had high blood pressure they would stop for one day and then begin again.”⁷⁸

Another said that staff may face questions from other government officials if a detainee is injured or dies. “They are very frightened of people with high blood pressure and heart disease. There is tension between the security bureau and the courts; they are opposing each other. If a prisoner dies because of the police, because of the guards, it will be recorded,” said one participant.⁷⁹ However, other participants said that they had witnessed people beaten to death and dying of injuries sustained during torture.⁸⁰ Said one participant: “I saw girls coming back from interrogation who fainted; they would scream and cry madly, and the police would repeat the interrogation again and again until they lost their minds. A 27-year-old girl died from that.”⁸¹

Foreign citizens may also warrant an extra level of caution – but only to a limited extent. One participant who was a citizen of Kazakhstan noted that medical clearance had to be obtained to transfer him to a re-education camp: “The [camp] doctor measured my blood pressure and said that I was a Kazakh citizen and had high blood pressure, and that I did not belong there. But they called the chief police officer and he ordered that I be taken to [a hospital], after all of their investigations, the doctor handed him a form and they took me straight to the camp.”⁸²

I saw girls coming back from interrogation who fainted; they would scream and cry madly, and the police would repeat the interrogation again and again until they lost their minds. A 27-year-old girl died from that.

-Female accountant from Almaty, 57, left XUAR in 2017

Psychological violence. All participants described the use of psychological violence such as extended isolation, severe verbal abuse, and witnessing violence against others. Extended isolation, a couple of participants said, was enough to drive detainees mad; as one participant said, “You cannot even die, even if you try.”⁸³ One participant described painful abuse that traded on Islamic cultural mores to humiliate and undercut family ties during torture: “They said, ‘A dog is better than your father; a dog can save

⁷⁸ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁷⁹ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

⁸⁰ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017; Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017; Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

⁸¹ Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

⁸² Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

⁸³ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

its offspring. How about your father? Who will protect you now and in the future?”⁸⁴

One 24-year-old former detainee from Yarkand said he heard police discuss getting 10,000 RMB for work contributing to each Uyghur conviction. “If any police [officer] gets

There is a 10,000 prize per person. That’s why they physically abuse any person under police custody until that person pleads guilty...

-Male cell phone business owner from Yarkand, 24, left XUAR in 2017

one person convicted, there is a 10,000 prize per person. That’s why they physically abuse any person under police custody until that person pleads guilty for something that person may not have done at all,” he said. “If it’s something eligible for a court case, there is 10,000 waiting. If it goes like this, within a year, that police [officer] will get rich. I heard two police [officers] say this with my own ears.”⁸⁵

The experience of witnessing verbal abuse and violence against others was described by many participants as equally if not more agonizing than their own experiences. One participant described his anguish at seeing an older woman abused for not being able to keep up with others during morning exercise: “That old woman cried with shame; I cried too. How could a woman in her 60s run without stopping at the same pace as a woman in her 20s?”⁸⁶ One participant who was a teacher in two re-education camps who experienced no ill treatment herself described herself as tormented by the conditions she witnessed: “Sometimes I cried with my husband at night and prayed for Allah to bless them...Every day before class I prayed for the strength to stand up.”⁸⁷

Distinctions between pre-detention facilities and re-education camps

Participants who had been detained in re-education camps described these as being more regimented in day-to-day operations and with more emphasis on obedience, for example in the form of strict observation of pedantic rules (perfectly made beds, for instance) or submissive behavior (for example, silence in dorm rooms/silence unless speaking Mandarin). One participant, for example, described an incident where some of his cellmates’ beds were not made to the right standard: “[One day] the police threw some quilts down on the mud because we did not meet the standard. They let us make our beds again, but we couldn’t reach the standard. The police were very angry and let their dogs onto our quilts. The dogs stepped on them and made them dirty.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Male, 26, Hotan, cook, left XUAR Jan 2018.

⁸⁵ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

⁸⁶ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁸⁷ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

⁸⁸ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

Some participants appeared to feel that re-education camps had a lower incidence of routine violence, as opposed to physical maltreatment. Nevertheless, participants noted, the violence directed at re-education camp inmates who have infringed rules or who have not “progressed” sufficiently can be severe. One participant described the cumulative penalties meted out for, for example, failing to recite the national anthem, failing to praise the PRC, or having to sit down due to pain:

- Demerit points which delay release.
- Beating with a rubber strap, followed by 24 hours of standing against a wall without food or water.
- As above, followed by imprisonment in a six-by-six-foot square dark cell.
- As above, followed by standing barefoot on ice in winter or left naked in the sun in summer.
- As above, followed by suspension in water above head height.” (The participant had not witnessed this last himself, but had heard of it from other detainees).⁸⁹

All participants who had been in re-education camps said that they had heard of fellow inmates who had died as a consequence of their maltreatment and torture.

One participant who had only been in a pre-trial detention center said that in his opinion and from what he had heard from others, re-education camps can be even more painful for younger healthy detainees than prison: “If someone is sentenced to jail, at least they will be used as slave labor, not like those in the camps. In camps, if anything wrong comes from your mouth, you’ll receive 40-50 blows with a baton. In prison, at least you can move around during the day.” The same participant, however, noted the huge toll that the conditions of his detention facility imposed on older detainees: “There were people between 65 and 75 who couldn’t even sit straight.”⁹⁰

Possibilities for information sharing in detention

All participants indicated that Uyghurs in detention, whether in jails/prisons or in indoctrination camps, have almost no opportunities to share information and would face brutal consequences if they tried.

- Surveillance appears universal in all conditions of detention, with official documents mandating the presence of cameras and/or microphones in every cell and toilet.⁹¹
- While detainees in pre-trial detention centers were apparently permitted to speak with each other, a few participants noted that any incriminating conversation in these centers can lead to maltreatment or torture. However, two participants who

⁸⁹ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017

⁹⁰ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

⁹¹ “There must be full coverage of dormitories and classrooms free of blind spots, ensuring that guards on duty can monitor in real time, record things in detail, and report suspicious circumstances immediately.”
<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6558510-China-Cables-Telegram-English.html>

had experience of indoctrination camps – one as a detainee, the other as a teacher – said that inmates in their camps were forbidden to speak to each other at all. “One day I was allowed to come into the room that was filled with camera screens. From the screens I saw that in every room there were 30 detainees. They have to sit silently even though they are in their cells,” the teacher said.⁹²

A few participants noted that detainees only have access to paper for the purpose of writing self-criticisms, which are handed in to their jailers.

RFA

RFA use outside the XUAR

Five participants were now regular RFA users in Europe and Turkey.

- **Methods:** Most RFA users regularly checked all three of RFA’s internet-based platforms (website, Facebook, YouTube), accessing both written pieces and audio/video clips. A few participants said that they relied on these platforms to deliver news to them, rather than going to search for it on the broader web. “I don’t usually look for news. I see what is happening daily based on what comes up on Facebook,” said one.⁹³
- **Sharing:** Several shared links to written pieces and audio/video clips from the RFA website, as well as to YouTube clips, via Facebook or WhatsApp, up to several times a week; several also shared Facebook posts directly.

Impressions of RFA

All participants who were RFA users – and most of those who were not – were impressed by their experience of RFA reporting, whether as regular users or when encountering RFA material for the first time as part of this study. “I like RFA because it is so real,” said one participant.⁹⁴ “I don’t think that there’s any aspect of their news I don’t like because they communicate with the motherland and come up with direct evidence,” said one.⁹⁵ “I don’t think that I have seen any other news outlet that provides this much information. Their reporters are courageous and hardworking,” said a third.⁹⁶ A couple of participants also praised RFA for taking the time for in-depth investigative reporting, rather than rushing to get pieces out.

Reflecting on their favorite aspects of RFA’s work overall, a couple of participants particularly enjoyed the weekly “Nazar” (“Opinion”) program. “I never miss ‘Nazar’ on

⁹² Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019

⁹³ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁹⁴ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

⁹⁵ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

⁹⁶ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

YouTube,” said one participant.⁹⁷ “[‘Nazar’] is very well done; I will watch this program regularly, it makes the news more colorful,” said another.⁹⁸ A couple of participants mentioned Shohret Hoshur and Gulchehra Hoja as particularly effective reporters and presenters, and one participant especially appreciated RFA’s use of alternating male and female voices.

Only one participant expressed reservations, primarily about the presentation style of some of RFA’s pieces; their sober and somewhat dated style, he worried, might not resonate with younger Uyghur users. “If I were to score RFA, I would say 60 out of 100 because the innovations are few and the style is old,” he said. “Some of our brothers and sisters are obsessed with bubbly words and gossip on Facebook and WhatsApp.” He went on to say, however, that he personally appreciated RFA’s content: “RFA illuminates our history.”⁹⁹

Other news sources

Other than RFA, the most common Uyghur news source accessed by participants was Turkey-based online outlet, Istiqlal TV.¹⁰⁰ “The rate of watching Istiqlal TV is very high in Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The reason for this is that they deliver the latest news in a lively way,” said one participant.¹⁰¹ One participant noted that Istiqlal sometimes rebroadcasts RFA pieces.¹⁰² Most participants, however, appeared to feel that RFA’s journalistic credentials were stronger than those of Istiqlal. “Istiqlal [can learn from RFA to be] democratic in imparting the news, be impartial, publish news no matter which individual, which organization, which collective it represents,” one participant said.¹⁰³

Other than Istiqlal, one participant also cited the Washington, D.C.-based website *Uighur Times*,¹⁰⁴ while another mentioned the Facebook page of Uyghur activist Erkin Sidiq.¹⁰⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS

RFA’s potential audience

Participants’ comments suggest that most consider RFA’s potential audience to be Uyghurs who are interested in serious news. “I think RFA will be more listened to by those interested in the daily political situation of the Uyghurs, who are waiting every day

⁹⁷ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

⁹⁸ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

⁹⁹ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Media-News-Company/%C4%B0stiqlal-Tv-750757458417681/>; <http://istiqlalhaber.com>

¹⁰¹ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹⁰² Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

¹⁰³ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

¹⁰⁴ <https://uighurtimes.com/index.php/about-us/>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/ErkinSidiq3/>

to hear that the PRC will be destroyed,” said one participant.¹⁰⁶ “RFA appeals to businessmen, intellectuals, people who are interested in politics,” said another.¹⁰⁷

I think that [RFA’s] news can be used as evidence because they write news based on facts.

-Male restaurant owner from Aksu, 26, left XUAR in 2016

RFA’s role outside the XUAR

In spite of high levels of connectivity within the Uyghur region, all participants indicated the PRC’s surveillance and the draconian penalties imposed for access severely limit all free media use inside the XUAR. Most participants appeared to see two primary potential roles for RFA outside the XUAR: as a credible, influential voice reporting on human rights abuses, and as a source of news and hope for émigré Uyghurs.

RFA as a reputable and impactful source for Uyghur human rights reporting

When we tell people around the world, even Uyghurs, the conditions that Uyghurs [still inside the XUAR] are living in, they will think that we’re telling a story from a novel. People who have not experienced this life can’t feel it. In Central Asia, it will feel impossible to people; in Europe, it is unimaginable.

-Male chef from Almaty/Karamay, 45, left XUAR in 2017

Most of the study’s participants appeared to feel that RFA’s main role at the moment is to inform the rest of the world of the ongoing repression in the Uyghur region. As one participant said, “[The plight of the Uyghurs] is a problem that the world really needs to pay attention to, and I consider it to be the responsibility of the world.”¹⁰⁸ Many participants said that even with increasing numbers of Uyghurs speaking out in the international media, the full extent of Uyghur oppression in the XUAR is still beyond the imaginations of many. “When we tell people around the world, even Uyghurs, the conditions that Uyghurs [still inside the XUAR] are living in, they will think that we’re telling a story from a novel,” one participant said. “People who have not experienced this life can’t feel it. In Central Asia, it will feel impossible to people; in Europe, it is unimaginable.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

¹⁰⁹ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

As a consequence, many participants appeared to feel that in these desperate times, RFA's role as a source of information *about* Uyghurs and the situation in the XUAR eclipses its role as a source of information *for* Uyghurs. "It is more important to expose what is going on in our homeland than it is to convey news from abroad to our homeland," said one participant.¹¹⁰ "Try to make the world understand even better [the situation Uyghurs find themselves in]," another participant urged.¹¹¹

In these circumstances, at least one participant felt, RFA's reputation for accuracy is a strong point: "I think that [RFA's] news can be used as evidence because they write news based on facts."¹¹²

To further inform the world of the oppression faced by Uyghurs, participants hoped that RFA would:

- Continue to provide detailed, factually strong reporting on conditions within the XUAR. "More focus on the gravity of the oppression and genocide that Uyghurs are facing, what Uyghurs' lives are really like under Chinese rule," said one participant.¹¹³ Wherever possible, a few participants said, RFA should include photographic and video material, which is particularly powerful at conveying the realities of the situation, as well as documentary evidence. One participant particularly urged RFA to reach out to Han Chinese who oppose the Xi Jinping regime, who may be in a better position to obtain and share information.
- Include more interviews with émigrés with experience of detention. "I think that they could be more effective in reporting on the camps if they did more detailed interviews with people who had been in the camps," one participant said.¹¹⁴ Another participant hoped that RFA would devote more coverage to the stories of Uyghurs who (like himself) had not been in re-education camps, but had suffered in pre-trial detention.
- Challenge PRC representations of Uyghurs in general, and detainees in particular, as terrorists or violent religious extremists. All participants emphasized that they and the vast majority of their fellow detainees were innocent victims of an Orwellian system; a few noted, however, that many people outside the PRC have accepted an image of Uyghurs as dangerous to non-Muslims and state order. The comments of a few participants highlight that even some Uyghurs within the XUAR turned a blind eye in years past to the detention of their compatriots under the influence of the constant refrain from PRC authorities that religious extremists and terrorists pose a danger to all XUAR citizens. "[In 2017]

¹¹⁰ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹¹¹ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

¹¹² Male, 23, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

¹¹³ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

¹¹⁴ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

we would say that it was understandable for our safety,” said the participant who had been a teacher in the camps.¹¹⁵

- Increase the reach of its material through translation into more languages. RFA’s English-language material, one participant noted, helps to make it impactful in the Anglophone world: “The reason for RFA’s influence is that it publishes in English with real evidence from people who have experienced the camps.”¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, other participants hoped that RFA’s reporting on the XUAR could be translated into Mandarin, Russian, and other languages. “We can’t show this material to our [non-Uyghur] friends in Germany, we could show it directly if there were translations,” one participant said.¹¹⁷

RFA as a source of news and hope for émigré Uyghurs

At the same time that they urged RFA’s Uyghur service to look outward as a source of information for the world on Uyghur human rights issues, several of the study’s participants still appreciated RFA’s provision of news to the Uyghur diaspora, not only in relation to the situation within the XUAR, but also in relation to developments inside and outside the PRC that are hopeful for the Uyghur human rights cause. Several participants were particularly attracted to reports on international support for Uyghur human rights. “Uyghurs already know about the Uyghur situation; everyone wants something new. As a mirror of the current world, RFA should summarize not only our problems but international news that relates to our situation,” said one participant.¹¹⁸ Beyond international condemnation of the PRC specifically for its treatment of Uyghurs, several participants said that they were generally happy to hear news of international criticism of the PRC and of sanctions and other developments that have the potential to curtail PRC power and prestige. (One participant, for instance, had been happy to hear that the Czech Republic had outlawed travel to the PRC for organ transplants.)

A few participants felt that RFA should be sustaining hope through more explicit coverage of and support for the activities of Uyghur nationalists. “They should broadcast news about the Uyghur Union and Kuzzat Altay (a Uyghur activist),” said one participant.¹¹⁹ Another participant hoped for more explicit RFA support for Uyghur independence: “Most of the news on RFA refers to the Uyghur homeland rather than East Turkestan, and there are few pieces on the Uyghurs’ desire for independence.”¹²⁰

General recommendations

More generally, one or more participants urged RFA to:

¹¹⁵ Female, 50, Urumqi, teacher, left XUAR Oct 2019.

¹¹⁶ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹¹⁷ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

¹¹⁸ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹¹⁹ Male, 35, Korla, businessman, left XUAR Jun 2017.

¹²⁰ Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

- Increase its number of Uyghur correspondents in order to collect more in-depth, on-the-ground reporting on stories not covered by other media outlets. “Diligently investigate and try to provide as much accurate and up-to-date information as possible,” said one participant.¹²¹
- Focus on original pieces, rather than rebroadcasting translations from other media outlets (Al Jazeera, BBC). “RFA should not just translate news that other media have broadcast already into Uyghur.”¹²²
- Increase the length of shorter reports and add more explanatory detail. This point extended beyond providing additional information; one participant, for instance, thought that it would be helpful simply to explain what people are seeing in videos.
- Update the style of some reporting. “The Uyghur people are very innovative, so it will be good if RFA can innovate [in its style],” said one participant.¹²³

One participant also hoped that RFA could provide more space for young people to speak out, and one wished that RFA would talk about the experiences of people like himself who had been in pre-trial detention centers, rather than re-education camps: “The media still doesn’t pay enough attention to cases like mine.”¹²⁴

Uyghur audiences and trauma

...I had night terrors. The screams, the crying, sounds from the cells – they wouldn’t go away. I could hear them every day. I didn’t want to live, because my life and my heart were already broken.

-Female accountant from Almaty, 57, left XUAR in 2017

The scale of Uyghur detention in the XUAR

As noted above, the scale of Uyghur detention in the XUAR is vast. Between a Uyghur prison population of at least 220,000, 1 to 1.5 million Uyghurs detained in extrajudicial internment,¹²⁵ and nearly 500,000 Uyghur children separated from their families and placed in boarding schools (a form of detention with well-documented traumatic outcomes¹²⁶), some 1.7 to 2.2 million Uyghurs – up to 18.5% of the XUAR’s official Uyghur population of 12 million – are likely to have experienced detention and its

¹²¹ Male, 24, Yarkand, cell phone business owner, left XUAR Apr 2017.

¹²² Male, 26, Aksu, restaurant owner, left XUAR Nov 2016.

¹²³ Male, 45, Almaty/Karamay (dual citizen PRC/Kazakhstan), chef, left XUAR Nov 2017.

¹²⁴ Male, 26, Hotan, cook, left XUAR Jan 2018.

¹²⁵ <https://www.jpolicy.com/brainwashing-police-guards-and-coercive-internment-evidence-from-chinese-government-documents-about-the-nature-and-extent-of-xinjiangs-vocational-training-internment-camps/>

¹²⁶ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/bringing-them-home>

traumatizing outcomes in recent years. It is possible that émigré Uyghur populations have higher rates of history of detention. RFA's 2018 refugee survey found that 30% of the 300 respondents surveyed had been detained while in the XUAR.¹²⁷

Meanwhile, a PRC white paper indicates that between 2014 and 2019, an average of 1.29 million Xinjiang workers a year have gone through “vocational training” – which does not necessarily involve detention, but often involves forced relocation with likely separation of family members.¹²⁸

Traumatic legacies of detention

My whole body trembled with horror for 20 days after I first entered the detention center. When someone lives in sorrow for a long time, their whole body will be darkened. The fear still exists. I can't move from one end of the house to the other when I'm alone at home. I'm still easily scared. I used to speak French well; now I'm afraid to speak it.

-Female engineer, 50s, left XUAR in 2019

The extreme violence and psychological torment of the detention experience had a clear traumatizing effect on all participants, all of whom described lasting physical and psychological consequences of their ordeals. Physical consequences included chronic pain, high blood pressure, and heart pain and problems; psychological consequences included signs of post-traumatic stress such as extreme anxiety, nightmares and depression. These lasting effects have also been described by other Uyghurs who have spoken with international media and with researchers.¹²⁹

Now I am not happy. I want to stay with the girls in the camps and know what has happened to them. Two months after I was released, I heard that detainees were taken to cities in China. I cried. I am still suffering because I can't do more to help them.

-Female accountant from Almaty, 57, left XUAR in 2017

¹²⁷ Radio Free Asia Uyghur Refugee and Traveler Survey, June to September 2018, n=300, 2019.

¹²⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/clues-to-scale-of-xinjiang-labour-operation-emerge-as-china-defends-camps>

¹²⁹ <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/premium-MAGAZINE-a-million-people-are-jailed-at-china-s-gulags-i-escaped-here-s-what-goes-on-inside-1.7994216>;
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b5ea/64fd197c4fc45d1879dcb7be94b9010ecf1b.pdf?_ga=2.221470616.1612546768.1595071536-1622058066.1595071536;

Participant	Traumatic stressors	Physical and emotional consequences
1	Hooded, witnessed severe beating of women, subjected to three days in a 'tiger chair,' forced to stand in sun until passed out from heat stroke, forced standing until temporarily paralyzed for two days. Witnessed older woman being abused for being unable to keep up with others during the morning run. Witnessed outcomes of torture of cellmates.	Hair has turned grey. This period has left him "silent and uncommunicative... After leaving for Egypt, I could not pray aloud even at home for a long time, if I raised my voice without attention when I praying and felt it suddenly, I was afraid that if anyone heard me, they would arrest me again. I could not get rid of that fear for a long time."
2	Sudden arrest despite holding Kazakh citizenship. "I was almost peeing my pants with fear, I was in such a state of panic that my whole body was shaking." Hooded, severe beating, torture during interrogation. Witnessed outcome of torture of cellmates. One cellmate died during interrogation, knew of several others who died. Father has died in a camp, many relatives have been arrested and were still held at the time of the interview.	Chronic pain in knees and wrists as a consequence of stress positions and torture. Scarring. Chronic anxiety. "I thought I was getting ready for death...this fear does not go away easily, and even now I still dream that the police are chasing me."
3	Hooded, two days in 'tiger chair,' beaten. Witnessed consequences of torture of cellmates.	"In prison, we used to laugh and make jokes. After arriving in Germany, my courage is gone."
4	Hooded, painful shackling, severe weight loss, exposure to heat and cold, swollen extremities, bowel problems, witnessed suffering of cellmates.	High blood pressure, hair turned white. "My whole body trembled with horror for 20 days after I first entered the detention center. When someone lives in sorrow for a long time, their whole body will be darkened. The fear still exists. I can't move from one end of the house to the other when I'm alone at home. I'm still easily scared. I used to speak French well; now I'm afraid to speak it."
5	Teacher in two re-education camps. Saw students humiliated, witnessed their health deteriorate, saw surveillance camera footage of their cell conditions. Witnessed a girl taken away with hemorrhaging, later told that she was dead; knew of other students who had died from preventable conditions such as urethritis. Knew of the nature of torture devices and witnessed the outcomes of torture: "Students who were severely tortured during interrogation were not able to go to class for a month, and when they came to class we saw wounds on their faces or other parts of their bodies. Sometimes I could hear tragic screams during class coming from the basement of the building, where [detainees] were tortured." After suffering an emotional breakdown and stopping teaching in the camps, was subjected to severe public self-criticism at her former school, forced into early retirement after 28 years of service.	High blood pressure. "I was shocked, the police laughed at them, I trembled until I entered the classroom and it was clear from my voice. ... Sometimes I cried with my husband at night and prayed for God to bless them and to give them support. Every day before class I prayed for strength to stand up... Suddenly I also got sick. My husband asked about the camp every day, I sobbed when I talked about it, most of these were young girls who weren't even married yet, I couldn't bear it. I could not lift my head and went to bed for ten days. [Once a replacement teacher was found] I spent a month in the hospital and then rested at home for two weeks."
6	Saw people beaten to death, fellow patients in the hospital executed by injection. Deeply affected by a mother separated from a newborn and given medication to stop lactation: "What was the crime of a newborn baby?"	"It has a huge impact on me; as a result, I had a psychological disorder." Severe depression upon return to Kazakhstan. "When I went to the toilet, I felt like policemen would come to punish me; during the night time I had night terrors. The screams, the crying, the sounds from the cells – they wouldn't go away, I could hear them every day. I didn't want to live, because my life and heart were already broken." Came to Turkey to

		tell her story in hopes of helping others in the camps: “During the days when I was in the camp, I told myself, ‘I will tell all of this to the world, I will not keep this to myself.’ I also promised the girls in the camp. I have kept my promise, I told whoever asked me, I didn’t add anything, I only told whatever happened to me, I didn’t make it up.” Survivor guilt: “I am still suffering because I can’t do more to help them. Now I am ready to sacrifice myself, I am happy to go anywhere, I don’t want to live in this life. I couldn’t do enough to fulfill my promise.”
7	Severe beatings, 5 days in a ‘tiger chair,’ hearing other people being tortured. “Sometimes hearing people scream from other rooms, I couldn’t even stop crying for them.” In 2019 found out that his wife has been sent to a re-education camp as well.	Chest pain, heart problems. “I realized that I hadn’t had one good night’s sleep since my brother left [for Turkey in 2014].” Constant worries for family back in the XUAR. When found out that his mother was dead, “I was not devastated as I should have been, on the contrary, I felt relieved for my mother...I still vividly remember my father in law telling me before I left, “Son, even death is better than living like us; now I pray every day that Allah may take my life sooner naturally.” Is experiencing memory loss and headaches, probably from head trauma.
8	Beatings during the intake process and severely beaten during interrogation, subjected to hanging torture, passed out repeatedly, witnessed outcomes of brutal torture of cellmates.	Scarring.

Trauma-informed broadcasting

The lasting psychological impacts experienced by this study’s participants and the potential extent of trauma among Uyghurs inside and outside the XUAR suggest that the subject matter of many RFA reports may bring up traumatic memories for many existing and potential RFA Uyghur consumers.

Three interviewees avoided discussing or were actively disturbed by some RFA sample segments that may have triggered traumatic response. One participant who had not used RFA before told the interviewer that, although she appreciated RFA telling the world about Uyghur suffering and the situation inside her homeland, she herself avoids any media coverage relating to her experience.¹³⁰ A young cook from Hotan said that he did not like the video about the forced marriage of Uyghurs because it is “really heartbreaking.”¹³¹ Finally, one woman from Almaty who had immigrated to Kazakhstan said the radio segment on forced labor by former Uyghur camp detainees left her deeply upset. She spoke of how she also had cried watching other reports on the camps on the internet. “Now I am not happy,” she said. “I want to stay with the girls in the camps and know what has happened to them. Two months after I was released, I heard that detainees were taken to cities in China; I cried. I am still suffering because I can’t do

¹³⁰ Female, 56, Karamay, engineer, left XUAR Aug 2019.

¹³¹ Male, 26, Hotan, cook, left XUAR Jan 2018.

more to help them.”¹³² Even Uyghur listeners with no personal history of trauma may find some reporting on conditions in the XUAR to provoke extreme anxiety if they still have family or friends who are in, or at risk of, detention.¹³³

While graphic descriptions of the suffering of Uyghurs in detention undoubtedly adds power to RFA’s reporting, material that triggers traumatic memories or anxieties in Uyghur audiences not only has the potential to re-traumatize individuals who have already suffered, but also to lead to news avoidance and a resulting disengagement from RFA among current or potential RFA consumers. Potential female listeners may be particularly affected: some research suggests that women are more likely to be news avoiders due to their primary responsibility for emotional labor in families, a role that can leave them both with fewer emotional reserves for engaging with confronting material and with more responsibility for negotiating a return to calm when other family members are distressed by news material.¹³⁴

While media organizations lack industry-wide guidelines for broadcasting to and creating content for traumatized populations and survivors of mass trauma, RFA can draw on journalistic best practices for covering sensitive stories¹³⁵ and guidelines from victims’ advocacy groups in the following ways:

- Avoid sensationalistic language, excessive details, and/or graphic visual images. In its handbook for reporting on torture, Europe-based non-profit Redress, which advocates for human rights victims, provides guidelines for coverage that captures the emotional impact of torture without resorting to explicit depictions of torture practices.¹³⁶
- Include trigger warnings to caution individuals who are exhibiting symptoms of post-traumatic stress or who may be experiencing extreme worry about family members still in the XUAR.¹³⁷
- Provide information on mental health hotlines, text-lines, or in-person services available in countries with a large Uyghur diaspora, including torture care facilities.¹³⁸ The International Council for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims has a comprehensive list of torture care facilities in its 75 member countries.¹³⁹

¹³² Female, 57, Almaty (Kazakh citizen), accountant, left XUAR Sept 2017.

¹³³ See, for instance, <https://mobile.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-11/fatimahs-story-uyghurs-australia-disappeared-china/12741202>

¹³⁴ <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/11/why-are-some-women-news-avoiders-new-research-suggests-one-reason-has-to-do-with-emotional-labor/>

¹³⁵ <https://www.routledge.com/Trauma-Reporting-A-Journalists-Guide-to-Covering-Sensitive-Stories/Healey/p/book/9781138482104>

¹³⁶ https://redress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Reporting_on_Torture_English.pdf

¹³⁷ <https://dartcenter.org/resources/>

¹³⁸ <https://www.onlinemswprograms.com/resources/social-issues/how-to-be-mindful-re-traumatization/>

¹³⁹ <https://irct.org/who-we-are/our-members>

- Try to provide hopeful elements where at all possible¹⁴⁰ – for example, by including reference to the latest developments in international support for Uyghur human rights when reporting on detention and maltreatment.

Given the likely prevalence of post-traumatic stress among existing and potential Uyghur listeners, RFA might also consider a mental health feature providing information on signs of post-traumatic stress, interviews with specialists in torture care, and tips for self-care.

¹⁴⁰ https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/DCE_JournoTraumaHandbook.pdf