

UN Report on the Uighurs, a Piece on the Geopolitical Chessboard?

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The long-awaited report on the Uighurs is out. It is sharp on China but contradicts the massive accusations that have been circulating in the West. The report was the subject of much wrangling and it threatens to become a weapon in the great geopolitical game between the West and China.

The context

It has been a long time coming, but finally the UN Human Rights Committee (OHCHR) [report](#) on the Uighurs has been released. The Uighurs are a Muslim population group in Xinjiang, a province in western China.

There is a great deal of controversy about this population group. Western countries in particular accuse China of “cultural genocide” while countries of the South,[1] including several leading Muslim countries, view it completely differently. For example, at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation summit in Pakistan in March 2022, China was invited as the ‘[guest of honour](#)’.

In the past, a lot of [fake news](#) about the Uighurs has been produced. That should come as no surprise. From the West, China is increasingly under fire. The [use of human rights](#) à la carte is a tried and tested means of pushing countries into a corner and arousing public opinion.

The report itself has been the subject of much debate. It took three years to get permission to publish it. There was a great deal of pressure from both Western governments and Beijing regarding the content and the date of publication. In such a context of wrangling and struggle for influence, neutrality is a relative term.

The report starts from the fact that the contested Chinese approach towards the Uighurs takes place against the background of “riots” and “violent incidents which the [Chinese]

Government has consistently characterised as terrorist in character. In 2009, [racist riots](#) led to 197 deaths, mostly Han Chinese.

An estimated [300 terrorist attacks](#) followed, resulting in dozens of deaths. During the civil war in Syria, [thousands of Uighur Muslim extremists](#) were active there, and sooner or later they would return to their homeland. According to the renowned American trade magazine [Foreign Policy](#), it became increasingly clear that China had become a new target of the Jihad.

In response to these serious terrorist attacks, Beijing has embarked on a vigorous anti-terrorism policy.

The OHCHR released simultaneously with its report a 121-page [report from China](#), which states that the state's fight against terrorism in the region is "necessary and just," takes place within "the rule of law," and "fully respects and safeguards human rights". However, OHCHR precisely considers China's counterterrorism approach to be "highly problematic" in terms of respect for human rights.

The report

The UN report is based on the one hand on forty in-depth interviews of witnesses, and on the other hand on a number of official Chinese documents[2] which the report says are "highly likely to be authentic". In both cases, however, it is not clear whether they are separate individual cases or a pattern of behaviour by the Chinese government. Either way, every individual is entitled to respect for his or her human rights.

For the many allegations in its report, OHCHR generally does not provide hard evidence. In addition to individual testimonies, the UN body draws conclusions or estimates based on certain indicators. Therefore, the report often expresses itself in the conditional mood.

We list the main conclusions of the report:

The most important allegation is the one about the so-called 'Vocational Education and Training Centres'. A large group of Uighurs was temporarily deprived of their freedom and forced to attend classes in those centres. This was the case at least between 2017 and 2019.

Although this was done according to Chinese law, according to OHCHR, the deprivation of liberty was "arbitrary" because the criteria were too vague or too strict. Thus, many people ended up in the centers for "extremism", an arbitrary charge according to OHCHR.

According to the OHCHR, there is credible evidence that in these centers a number of Uighurs were victims of "cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment" as well as "sexual and gender-based violence".

"Estimates of the number of people detained range from tens of thousands to over a million." The report cannot provide more precise figures because the calculation was based, among other things, on a report by a local party secretary and on satellite images of "walled buildings," which, however, are not necessarily certain to be such centres.[3]

Furthermore, Uighurs were subjected to mandatory family planning, according to the UN commission. The report also mentions the destruction of religious buildings, especially in the

years 2017 and 2018. The Chinese government contradicts this, saying these were renovations.

The UN Human Rights Committee is sharp in its criticism of China, but does contradict the massive accusations that have circulated in the West. There is no mention of “cultural genocide,” “concentration camps” or “large-scale forced labour” in the report.

For its part, China strongly opposes the conclusions of the UN report which it says “ignores the human rights achievements” in Xinjiang, such as the complete eradication of poverty by the end of 2020.

Beijing also says it ignores “the devastating damage caused by terrorism and extremism to the human rights of people of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang”. There have been no terrorist attacks since late 2016. Furthermore, Beijing acknowledges to have convicted 13,000 people [for terrorism](#) and 30,000 people for illegal activities during that period.

Reactions and comments

Critical readers of the report mainly question the dimensions of the allegations and their possible consequences. If the human rights violations were indeed so serious and on such a large scale, why has there not been a large influx of refugees from the affected Uighur population?

Despite the fact that the OHCHR’s recommendations are moderate, this report will be seized upon to intensify the economic war against China and tighten the [military squeeze](#) on the country.

Another thing, on the issue of the Uighurs there is a lot of commotion in the West. This contrasts sharply with the attitude towards neighbouring India. Since the end of 2019, [camps have been built](#) in the north of the country to deport hundreds of thousands of so-called “illegals.

Muslims are increasingly the [target of pogroms](#). One such pogrom left 45 dead in March 2020. In 2021, a rally was held in the northern state of Uttarakhand where speakers [called for genocide](#) against Muslims and other minorities in the name of protecting Hinduism.

The [province of Kashmir](#), home to mostly Muslims, is occupied by more than half a million Indian soldiers. In 2020, all telephone and internet connections were cut off for months. 7,000 politicians, businessmen and other prominent citizens were arrested without charge. All meetings were banned.

Why is there such a deafening silence about all these issues from our politicians or in the mainstream media? Why is it that some are allowed to do as they please while others are judged and dealt with very harshly? Apparently human rights are used as a weapon in the great geopolitical game.

In a 2018 speech, a former US chief of staff already outlined how the Uighur issue can be used [to destabilize China from within](#). A human rights campaign is an important part of such a strategy.

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Notes

[1] At the [UN Commission on Human Rights](#) in October 2021, 43 UN member states called on China to immediately admit independent observers, while 62 other UN member states, mostly countries of the South, argued that “disinformation” was involved.

[2] These include the China Cables, the Xinjiang Papers, the Karakax List, the Urumqi Police database and the Xinjiang Police Files.

[3] It is about a report by a local party secretary who claims that in a certain village 30 percent of the population had to be re-educated. Based in part on this, the report speaks of an estimate of tens of thousands to more than one million. “On the basis of the information currently before it, OHCHR is not in a position to confirm estimates of total numbers of individuals affected by the VETC system.” (VETC stands for “Vocational Education and Training Centres”.)

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