The Plight of the Uyghurs in East Turkestan

*Briefing note - December 2013*

On **17 December 2013**, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), in cooperation with the office of Mr. Niccolò Rinaldi MEP (ALDE), the World Uyghur Congress and Mahatma Gandhi International, are holding an international conference focusing on the current situation of the Uyghurs in China. In light of the conference, this briefing note intends to inform participants, interest groups and stakeholders about the Uyghurs and the different forms of human rights violations they face.

This **8-page briefing note includes sections on:**

- East Turkestan’s ethnic makeup
- Economic and social development
- China’s assimilation policies
- Religious persecution
- The fight against “three forces of evil”
- The status of Uyghur women
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**About UNPO**

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent and democratic membership organization. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognized or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

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East Turkestan’s ethnic makeup

*East Turkestan*, also known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Province (official Chinese denomination), is situated in northwestern China and covers a territory of about 1.6 million km².

Historically, East Turkestan has been inhabited by *Uyghurs*. However, the situation has drastically changed over the past decades as Beijing launched its policy of assimilation, which, amongst other measures, encouraged Han Chinese to go live in East Turkestan.

There are ongoing disputes over the ethnic composition of East Turkestan. According to the official Chinese data from 2003, there are about 19 million inhabiting the region and “the largest ethnic group comprises some 7,497,700 Han people, accounting for 40.6 percent of the population of Xinjiang”. [Official Census of Xinjiang Autonomous Region] However, Uyghurs claim that they number **up to 20 million people** in East Turkestan. [WUC Official Webpage]

The main language spoken in East Turkestan is Uyghur (*Turkic language*), of which the script has been Arabic since the spread of Islam in 10th century.

In the beginning of 20th century the Uyghurs declared independence over their historical land, which lasted only briefly. However, since the 1949 revolution they have been under the tight control of the Chinese authorities.

The number of Han Chinese inhabitants continues to grow in the region, progressively starting to undermine the Uyghur population in numbers.

Economic and social development

As economic activity gradually increased in China during the last decades, the importance of East Turkestan grew. The region has become a key asset in China’s “Go-West” policy, aiming to secure influence in Central Asia. Well-known gas and oil reserves in the region have drawn the attention of the Chinese government, which is subsequently seeking to impose stronger control over the area.

One of the main reasons for the Chinese authorities’ special focus on East Turkestan is their intention to establish a **new “Silk Road”**, passing through the ancient Uyghur city of Kashgar. This new economic trade route with Central and South-East Asian countries implies a reform in infrastructure and industry, as well as in the tertiary sector as cities continue to grow.

The city of Kashgar provides a telling example of what awaits East Turkestan and China as a whole: ancient parts of this Uyghur city, located on the northern route of the Silk Road, have been demolished in order to make place for a modernized city.

Additionally, the establishment of the *Xinjiang Construction and Production Corps*, also known as XPCC or Bingtuan, in 1954 explicitly marked an expansionist policy of the Chinese Government in East Turkestan. Bingtuan is a unique governmental economic and semi-military organization, which produces approximately “one-sixth of Xinjiang’s GDP, including 40% of cotton, one of the region’s main cash crops”. [The Economist, May 2013]
Besides from that, in the areas inhabited predominantly by Han Chinese, XPCC established its own schools, hospitals and newspapers. Additionally, the presence of a separate police force, courts and prisons, together with a strong military presence, threatens local Uyghurs who are barely represented in this giant, autonomous state-run corporation.

China’s assimilation policies

One of the main consequences of increased control of the central government over East Turkestan has been the influx of Han Chinese into the region. Many advantages are offered to those willing to settle in East Turkestan and start a business, initiatives from which Uyghurs are often purposefully excluded. This policy is progressively threatening the Uyghur identity in the region. Discrimination against Uyghurs is commonplace across the entire region, in a society that portrays them as being unreliable and prone to religious extremism. With all top positions in public offices being taken by Han Chinese, the Uyghurs are left in an extremely vulnerable position.

China’s assimilation policy also includes the marginalization of the Uyghur language and religion. Uyghurs with little to no knowledge of Mandarin are excluded from certain jobs as this language pre-requisite only became a reality as more and more Han Chinese moved in. The safekeeping of the Uyghur language has now become an issue in Uyghur communities striving to maintain and pass on their cultural heritage. Religious persecution has also become an issue following the instauration of this assimilation policy – more on this in the section below.

Religious persecution

For decades, Xinjiang has been the site of ethnic strife between Muslim Uyghurs and Han Chinese. Regardless the Constitutional guarantee on freedom of religious belief, the Chinese authorities discourage Uyghurs from practicing their faith.

In order to tighten control over East Turkestan, imams are required to follow political education classes and use government-printed Korans. Indeed, only officially approved texts of the Koran and sermons are permitted to be published by the government.

At present, the number of mosques in East Turkestan is not sufficient to meet the needs of the local Muslim population. The building of new mosques is prohibited.

The governmental control of religious activity has permeated to even basic and personal activities of Uyghurs. A remarkable example is that youths are not allowed to pray or fast during Ramadan, and are prohibited to travel to Mecca for the Hajj. In fact, travel to Mecca during the Hajj is made difficult even for adults as Uyghurs may only travel with government-sponsored travel agencies asking participants exorbitant prices. Furthermore, the security apparatus is usually reinforced during the month of Ramadan.

Unofficial religious schools, taking place in private houses for lack of an alternative, have been targeted, resulting in the arrest of individuals and the violent intrusion in private houses by policemen.

Public awareness campaigns are in place, citing the illegality of wearing beards (for men) or veils (for women).
The fight against “three forces of evil”

The crackdown on the Muslim population of East Turkestan further intensified after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The Chinese government used the pretext of the “international war against terror” in its oppression of the Uyghur population by accusing the latter - without proof - of supporting Osama Bin Laden’s global terrorist network.

To note, in China, terrorism is defined as the threatened use of violence to affect political and ideological change. Together with religious fundamentalism and separatism, it is considered to be included into the list of one of “Three evils”, officially declared by the Chinese Government. These charges are routinely used as a pretext to target Uyghurs, although they do not meet internationally accepted legal standards.

Chinese anti-terror legislation has been subject to continuous debate. A clear example of this is the Chinese Criminal Procedure Law, which was modified in January 2013.

Even though newly introduced amendments to the Chinese Criminal Procedure Law (CPL) state that the detention can happen at the “domicile of the suspect of defendant” (Articles 73 and 91), it introduces a list of exceptions to the general rule. The same article 73 states that in case there is no permanent domicile, “surveillance may be enforced at a designated place of residence”.

Furthermore, Article 73 defines an exceptional status of primary investigation when there is suspicion of “crimes endangering state security”.

Generally speaking, recent amendments to the CPL to a certain extent facilitate the already-wide spread practices of enforced disappearances.

The newly revised CPL empowered practices used widely after July 2009 Urumchi incident and affected mainly Muslim Uyghurs, which since then have been regularly depicted as terrorists by the Chinese authorities.

It is often underlined by international experts that the Chinese authorities place bogus charges of terrorism on peaceful protestors, journalists and human rights activists who are critical of the government. In order to hide human rights abuses and silence the opposition, trials for detainees are often being held behind closed doors, in the presence of lawyers appointed by the central government.

It is clear that the Chinese authorities seek to gain support from the international community in their “fight against terrorism”. In this sense, the Shanghai treaty signed in 1996 between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, used as an accord to suppress ethnic Uyghur minorities from supporting separatism in Xinjiang and to guarantee extradition of Chinese Uyghurs seeking for asylum in neighbouring countries, is remarkable.

The status of Uyghur women

Apart from an overall clampdown on Uyghurs, the Chinese government has intensified repressive measures against female Uyghurs in East Turkestan.

Forced abortions and sterilizations are widely practiced and encouraged throughout the entire country within a controversial family planning policy.

Aging population and an extreme shortage of a potential young labour force urged Beijing to change its one-child family policy. Amendments introduced in November 2013 provide a possibility for a couple to have two children, “if either member of a couple is an only child”. [The Washington Post, 22.02.2013]

Despite the fact that national minorities are among the exceptions to official family planning policy1 and the recent positive changes to it,

1 Uyghurs and other minority groups are allowed to have three children in rural areas and two children in urban areas (Article 15 of the XUAR Regulation on Population and Family Planning).
Uyghur women have become victims of severe violations of their individual rights and dignity due to the cases of **forceful abortions and sterilizations**, in particular, taking place in rural areas. [UHRDF, July 2011]

Another issue as regards the suppression of Uyghur women in China concerns numerous attempts to prevent the former from wearing headscarves and change women’s clothing habits have been reported in Xinjiang.

In November 2013, the “Project Beauty” campaign was launched with an accompanying video clip depicting “the joys of exposing one’s face”. Veil-wearing women are registered at stands around Kashgar and are made to watch the video. They are also encouraged to participate in training programmes to make them **change their fashion styles**. [International Business Times, 27.11.2013]

Another assimilationist policy implemented by the Chinese authorities includes transferring young, unmarried Uyghur girls to work in southern China – which in most cases signifies being exploited, often times sexually. [UHRP, February 2008].

**Enforced disappearances**

Another pressing issue facing the Uyghurs in China is the practice of enforced disappearances. The overall situation in East Turkestan deteriorated in the wake of the turbulent unrest in the region after 5 July 2009 clashes in Urumchi.

Initially planned as a peaceful demonstration for the support of families of those killed and injured at a toy factory in Shaoguan on 26 June 2009, it ended up with severe interethnic clashes. Hundreds of people were killed and many more injured.

It was also reported about dozens of policemen opening fire on protesters and “using batons to disperse a crowd”. [The Star, 5.07.2013]

In the aftermath of July clashes, hundreds of Uyghurs were arrested and held **incommunicado**, reinforcing a trend that has since grown: forcibly disappearing people, giving no indication of their whereabouts to family or friends. Families and friends are unable to locate their loved-one as authorities refuse to confirm their detention or their death.

Chinese security forces regularly conduct **raids in Uyghur areas**, arresting dozens of people on charges of sparking social unrest. According to data provided by the China Law Yearbook, “more than 1000 people” were arrested in 2012 on charges of “endangering state security”. [The Guardian, 27.11.2013]

The situation is extremely complex, especially taking into account the fact that China has not adopted or ratified several relevant international instruments, such as the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Additionally, the practice of **organ harvesting** is considered to be closely linked to the practice of enforced disappearances in China, mainly targeting Uyghurs and the Falun Gong. Political prisoners are often selected as organ matches for people from China and abroad.

**Recent developments**

Ethnic tensions in East Turkestan are on the rise following China’s crackdown on the region and attempts to silence dissent. The Tiananmen car explosion that left five people dead on 29 October 2013 was depicted by the Chinese authorities as a terrorist attack and pointed at the Uyghur community. Authorities were quick to state that the “spread of religious extremism” in East Turkestan is the cause of the violence.

Furthermore, a **repressive education policy** was initiated on 25 November 2013. The Chinese universities of East Turkestan are now obliging students to pass a test on political views and
declare their allegiance to the Chinese government before being able to graduate.

Uyghurs also face problems in regard to passport acquisition and subsequent travel restrictions, despite an overall policy of simplifying the passport application procedure. Human rights activists and journalists are regularly prevented from accessing East Turkestan.

Since April 2013 a new phase of the escalation of interethnic tensions has been observed in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. In particular, earlier this year [April 2013] 21 people were killed in clashes between Uyghurs and Chinese security forces in the Siriqbuya prefecture in Maralbeshi county.

Apart from that, according to the official Chinese narrative, 19 people were arrested in the aftermath of the Maralbeshi accident for their supposed engagement in this “terrorist” incident. These detained individuals were accused of being part of a closed organization that was founded in September 2012 by Qasim Muhammat.

On 26 June 2013 another violent attack was reported in Lukchun village in the Turpan Prefecture, which is predominantly inhabited by Uyghurs. The reasons for the emergence of the riot as well as the ethnic affiliation of victims have not been revealed by the Chinese government. Initially defining the rioters as “knife-wielding mobs”, the Chinese authorities later altered their position by depicting the rebels as terrorists. Overall, government sources reported the death of 9 policemen and 8 civilians in clashes.

On 28 June 2013, new disturbances were reported in Urumchi and Hotan, leaving two people dead according to government sources (though later reports suggest at least 15 people were killed).

Violent clashes followed the riots of the 28 June in Hotan. In accordance with the information provided by the Global Times, the protest involved approximately 100 people that attacked a police station in Hotan, Qaraqah County. As in previous cases, the Chinese authorities used the pretext of the spread of extremism.

Overall, since the outbreak of the Maralbeshi clashes, approximately 125-136 people have been detained and/or arrested, though this figure is vague and rather doubtful, and could be in fact even higher. [WUC Report, July 2013]

Radio Free Asia reported the death of nine young people of Uyghur ethnic origin and two local policemen on 16 November 2013 at the Siriqbuya police station.

UNPO activities

Raising awareness of issues vital to the welfare of the Uyghur minority in China has been one of the organization’s main concerns, with the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) being a founding member of the organization in 1991.

Rebiya Kadeer, president of the WUC and well-known Uyghur human rights activist in exile, has continuously strived for Uyghur rights in China, with the support of UNPO.

Ms. Kadeer was sentenced to eight years in prison in China for her political activism in August 1999. After prominent international human rights organizations, together with the US Congress, continuously campaigned for her freedom, Ms. Kadeer was released in March 2005 and has since lead the Uyghur community’s peaceful activism in exile.
Mrs. Rebiya Kadeer

UNPO organized advocacy visits, campaigns and events aiming at bringing the Uyghur plight to the attention of international media and institutions. Among the most recent events, these include the organization of several advocacy visits and the following conferences:

- **Uyghur – China Dialogue** (29-30 April 2010), sponsored by Mr. Niccolò Rinaldi (ALDE) and Ivo Vaigl (ALDE);
- **The City of Kashqar: An Oasis of the Silk Road on the Brink of Extinction**, convened by Ms. Frieda Brepoels (MEP), Kinga Gál (EPP), Nicole Kiil-Nielsen (Greens/EFA), Edward McMillan-Scott (ALDE), Niccolò Rinaldi (ALDE), Helga Trüpel (Greens/EFA);
- **50 Years After Test 596: China’s Nuclear Programme In East Turkestan and Its Impact Today** (29 February 2012), convened by Mr. László Tőkés (EPP), Ms. Kristina Ojuland (ALDE) and Mr. Vytautas Landsbergis (EPP);
- **Enforced Disappearances: Tackling an Invisible Crime** (23 January 2013), supported by the office of Mr. Josef Weidenholzer (S&D);
- **Religious Persecution by China: A Horror Story** (29 January 2013), supported by Mr. Edward McMillan-Scott (ALDE), Mr. Leonidas Donskis (ALDE) and Mr. Tunne Kelam (EPP).

**Conclusion**

The human rights situation facing the Uyghur minority in China remains in dire straits on all levels: political, civic and cultural. Uyghurs face threats of violence, religious discrimination and social exclusion. The Chinese government does not provide political representation of the interests or concerns of non-Han Chinese minorities in the Xinjiang Region.

Due to the assimilationist policy of the Chinese government, ethnic Uyghurs now make up less than half of the local population. Moreover, regardless of the economic growth pushed by the Chinese officials in Xinjiang, most of the good jobs go to Han Chinese, by that creating discontent among ethnic Uyghur population.

Apart from that, due to the proclaimed official Chinese policy to fight terrorism in the country, Uyghurs happened to appear under a direct threat of stigmatization. Muslim practices are being suppressed all over the country, in particular in regard to young people. There is a shortage of Islamic publications well-educated clerics.

Furthermore, numerous cases of enforced disappearances and massive killings of Uyghurs have been reported, in particular since July 2009 Urumchi incident.
Recommendations to the European Union:

- To urge the Chinese Government to cease all forms of ethnic and religious discrimination and stop arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances of Uyghur activists;
- To support Uyghur asylum-seekers, who are often times deported back to China and most likely face imprisonment, torture and capital punishment;
- To encourage the Government of China to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances;
- To exercise pressure on the Chinese authorities and urge it to stop its ongoing assimilation policy, which targets the Uyghur and other minority groups in China;
- To make human rights the main leverage in all talks and negotiations with China, in all fields.
- To put pressure on the Chinese government to immediately stop the implementation of the policy of transferring Uyghur women from East Turkestan to inner China and prohibit discriminative practices of family planning policies in East Turkestan.