

There is now more evidence than ever that China is imprisoning Uighurs

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Our findings from satellite images reveal 380 detention camps in Xinjiang, pointing to a campaign of ethnic replacement

Since 2017, Xinjiang in China has been reeling from a brutal crackdown outlawing both public and private displays of [Uighur](#) culture or identity, not to mention political dissent. A cornerstone of this repression, and the foundation upon which all other coercive measures are built, is an intense and unparalleled carceral regime: a network of hundreds of political indoctrination camps, detention centres and prisons. This has forced the region's inhabitants not only into obedience but also into a chilling silence.

By most estimates, [about 10%](#) of Uighurs and other Muslim nationalities in Xinjiang have found themselves arbitrarily detained in these camps.

While researching human rights in Xinjiang at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, a non-partisan thinktank based in Canberra, I've spent two years [scouring satellite imagery](#) and working with journalists, researchers and survivors to locate as many of these secretive camps as possible. The results are shocking, and a direct contradiction to official claims.

On Thursday we released the full findings on a newly launched website, the [Xinjiang Data Project](#).

In total, we have found 380 separate detention facilities that have either sprung out of the deserts and oases, or expanded from smaller detention facilities since 2017. We don't believe that we have found them all. The largest is more than 300 acres in size. That is more than three and a half Disneylands. Nearly nine Pentagons.

Using official population figures, the 380 camps equate to at least one new or expanded detention facility for every 37,000 people of non-Han nationality in [Xinjiang](#). This would be the equivalent of New York City building more than 55 prisons only for black Americans in just over three years.

The reality on the ground in Xinjiang differs dramatically from claims by the region's government. Xinjiang's governor, Shohrat Zakir, in December last year [said](#) that "all the trainees ... have completed their studies", and "returned to society". This is directly contradicted by the satellite evidence. Dozens of camps have been significantly expanded in the months leading up to, and since, Zakir's assertion. At the time of writing, more than a dozen detention facilities remain under construction. The largest detention camp in Xinjiang, south-east of the capital, Urumqi, expanded by an entire kilometre in 2019. These renovations, which added about 20 new buildings, were not complete until November 2019, weeks before Zakir's claim that everyone had been released.

In the months preceding and since Zakir's claim we have seen more than 60 detention facilities expand in total.

Near the city of Kashgar, and next door to a vocational training school jointly funded by the [World Bank](#) until April this year, a separate, newly built, 60-acre detention camp opened in January 2020. After Zakir told the world that all detainees had been released. This new camp is entirely surrounded by a 14-metre-high wall with 10-metre watchtowers on top. There are 13 five-storey residential complexes, which total 100,000 square metres of residential floorspace – roughly similar to that of the Chrysler Building. We estimate that this single newly opened camp can likely accommodate up to 10,000 detainees.

Indeed, all available satellite evidence, along with victim testimony, suggests that rather than being released into society, as claimed by Zakir, tens of thousands of detainees are being forcibly transferred to higher security detention facilities, which have, in many cases, dramatically expanded since 2019.

The physical removal of people from society has played its part in creating the silence across Xinjiang, but more impactful is the atmosphere of fear that this scale of arbitrary detention breeds.

In Xinjiang, if you are a Uighur or other persecuted nationality, the realistic threat of detention hangs over every move you make. If you upset the wrong local official, say the wrong thing to the party cadre sent to surveil you in your home, or even upset a Han neighbour, you risk detention.

So instead, they choose to keep quiet.

Which is how Beijing wants it. Once you leave the tourist precincts, a hush prevails in cities that have supported life for millennia, and the veneer of hustle brought by hundreds of mostly Han Chinese tourists visiting these precincts fades fast.

In early 2020, a 20-minute [video](#) was posted to YouTube, apparently filmed by a tourist walking through alleyways of Kashgar's ancient Gaotai dwellings. In the Uighur community less than 200 metres from the main tourist area, there is not a single other person, not a single voice other than his own. Indeed, there was nothing to betray that the empty homes he walked past had been inhabited for more than 600 years.

Another tourist's [video](#), taken in the same alleyways around four years prior, is full of mothers shouting to their children on the street, men in Islamic garb chatting and children sitting in their doorways.

A [video](#) from last month shows police preventing tourists from entering the neighbourhood at all, saying: "No one is there."

A carceral system that is as expansive, as coercive and as lacking in due process as Xinjiang's makes it impossible for persecuted minorities in Xinjiang to resist any request from anyone who is considered more loyal to the party.

Xinjiang's camps make reasonable consent an impossibility for [Uighurs](#) and other Muslim nationalities.

The carceral system that terrifies the region's indigenous ethnic groups into complete silence and obedience has not abated. Authorities can, and do, indefinitely detain Uighurs for any slight indiscretion, and this threat controls every aspect of Xinjiang's society.

Tens of thousands of former detainees are likely to have been transferred into forced labour programmes. But Uighurs across Xinjiang have no recourse to deal with abusive employers, or to refuse invasive surveillance or [medical procedures](#), certainly not without risking detention.

These abuses happen not only with impunity, but in many cases with explicit encouragement from government authorities.

Xinjiang's continuing detention camps cast a shadow over the whole region. They underpin a vast network of labour programmes where consent is impossible. They contaminate the [supply chains](#) of hundreds of multinational companies with forced labour, and they implicate not only Chinese authorities, but much of the rest of the world in a concerted campaign of ethnic replacement that credible reports suggest may well amount to genocide.

Nathan Ruser is a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. He specialises in geospatial and satellite analysis of human rights abuses.

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