

The Uyghur Genocide
By Jimmy Quinn
September 3, 2020

CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY officials say that the Uyghurs, a Turkic minority in the Xinjiang region, are the “happiest Muslims in the world.” The evidence trickling out of western China tells a different story. In July, U.S. customs officials intercepted a 13-ton shipment of beauty products made out of human hair from the region and a video of blindfolded prisoners being led onto train cars went viral. Over the past couple of years, some have compared the human tragedy unfolding there to North Korean totalitarianism and South African apartheid. More recent evidence has inspired comparisons to the Holocaust. “Genocide” is a word that packs a punch, spurring action by connecting “the solemn commitments of the past and a new atrocity unfolding before the world’s eyes,” as a report by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Simon-Skjodt Center put it last year. This word, sadly, is now an apt descriptor for the situation in Xinjiang.

Thanks to the fearless work of researchers, journalists, and victims, it’s now widely known that the CCP in 2017 stepped up its repression of the Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities by means of a mass-internment drive and a new, Orwellian surveillance state. When the Uyghurs “graduated” from these “reeducation” and “vocational training” facilities, to borrow the euphemistic terminology of CCP officials, many were forced into slave labor. All told, over a million Uyghurs and other members of Turkic minorities are estimated to have been detained, and a total of 3 million people to have been swept up in various reeducation efforts. Others were charged with bogus crimes and remain imprisoned. Beijing, citing a few terrorist incidents that took place in 2014, claims that it’s stamping out extremism, but its true aim is to solidify Han Chinese dominance over Xinjiang.

For years, experts and activists have called the situation a “cultural genocide.” That label carries a blistering significance and refers to the CCP’s attempts to wipe out Uyghur culture and traditions. The CCP has razed burial sites, closed mosques, and effectively criminalized most expressions of faith. Still, cultural genocide is not recognized as a crime under the U.N.’s 1948 convention on genocide. Invoking cultural genocide rather than simply genocide has been a cautious way to speak out about the situation in Xinjiang without discrediting one’s argument through exaggeration. In light of recent developments, that’s no longer required.

In late June, Adrian Zenz, the German anthropologist who has provided most of the groundbreaking revelations on the Xinjiang mass-detention drive, published a new report detailing a systematic forced-sterilization and birth-control program to lower Uyghur birth rates. Among his findings were that birth rates plummeted 84 percent from 2015 to 2018 in Xinjiang’s two major Uyghur prefectures; that a mass campaign to sterilize 14 to 34 percent of Uyghur women in rural parts of the region was underway; and that the CCP planned to sterilize or implant intrauterine contraceptive devices in 80 percent of childbearing-age women in Xinjiang’s rural southern areas. During the same period, Zenz noted, the state worked successfully to increase the Han Chinese population in Xinjiang. He likens these population-control techniques, which are based on ethnicity, to “opening or closing a faucet.” They are reminiscent of the CCP’s rule over Tibet, where Chen Quanguo, the party official who has presided over the Xinjiang genocide, gained a reputation for ruthless competence.

This implicates one of the five acts that can be considered genocide under Article II of the convention: “imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.” Prior to June, there was already evidence implicating CCP officials in the four other acts: They have killed and caused “serious bodily or mental harm” to Uyghurs, two of the acts. In addition, the CCP has inflicted on the Uyghur people “conditions of life calculated to bring about [their] physical destruction in whole or in part,” by deliberately failing to provide adequate living conditions to detainees. And the CCP has “forcibly [transferred] children of the group to another group,” by sending Uyghur children, whose parents in many cases are detained in the camps, to state facilities.

The revelation of forced birth control and sterilization has been a tipping point. Following the release of Zenz’s report, two Uyghur human-rights organizations filed a complaint with the International Criminal Court alleging genocide. And in late August, *Politico* reported that the Trump administration had held preliminary discussions about issuing a formal genocide determination. Indeed, the latest Zenz report clears a path for such a legal determination.

In addition to establishing the perpetration of acts listed in the convention, though, State Department lawyers must prove that the CCP targets “members of a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group” and that this targeting reflects an intent to destroy the Uyghurs “in whole or in part.” Clearly, the Uyghurs are an ethnic group protected under the genocide convention. Intent is the trickier part.

How can the State Department assert that CCP officials have acted with the intent to destroy the Uyghur people? The very existence of coordinated government efforts such as the birth-control drive and the separation of Uyghur children from their parents goes a long way toward demonstrating that intent. And even as Chinese-government officials have claimed that the Uyghurs pose a significant threat of terrorism, they’ve been exceedingly transparent about their real goal. “Break their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins,” wrote one CCP religious-affairs official in a 2019 article. If such transparent statements of intent seem too tenuous, however, the State Department could also claim that the CCP’s cultural-genocide effort itself proves intent of “physical” genocide against the group’s members, a line of legal reasoning offered in a partially dissenting opinion in a case before the U.N.’s tribunal on war crimes in Yugoslavia.

But even with a compelling legal argument, genocide-determination decisions are fraught. In two post–Cold War mass atrocities — those in Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990s — the State Department worried that a finding of genocide would ratchet up political pressure to act. But the main obstacle to a genocide finding today is the *lack* of attention paid to Xinjiang. Like the Bush administration’s 2004 determination that genocide was being committed in Darfur, a designation on Xinjiang could call attention to the issue and rally an international response.

Beijing’s sophisticated disinformation efforts and its investments in other countries have granted it near-impunity to act against the Uyghurs. The CCP has achieved the remarkable feat of not just convincing other countries to turn a blind eye but even pressuring many to endorse its actions. At the U.N. Human Rights Council, 46 countries praised the Xinjiang detention drive in the immediate wake of the forced-sterilization report, congratulating Beijing for its “remarkable achievements” and its work to fight terrorism. Many of the 46 are developing countries in Africa and the Middle East that have received significant Chinese investment and believe Beijing’s narrative about extremism. They include 22 members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. The world’s liberal democracies have

a better, but severely lacking, record. Many European governments have merely expressed their concern; others have declined to do even that. The 2022 Winter Olympics are still set to take place in Beijing.

By getting out in front of other countries, the United States could make it awkward for its allies to avoid calling the situation a genocide and galvanize the efforts of human-rights groups that have long pushed for such a designation. Global companies implicated in supply chains tainted by Uyghur slave labor have so far largely escaped widespread public criticism, even as the U.S. government prepares to enforce some of the sanctions it imposed this summer, which will affect those firms. In addition to achieving progress on the forced-labor issue, a finding of genocide might convince U.S.-based social-media companies to reconsider policies under which they allow Chinese-government accounts to spread disinformation about Xinjiang.

All that said, some experts on preventing mass atrocities warn that focusing too much on genocide can reduce the perceived need to act on other crimes that don't precisely meet the definition but can be just as horrific, such as mass killings based exclusively on political affiliation. And some China-watchers worry that the Trump administration has politicized disputes with Beijing so much that a finding of genocide would seem like just another "tough on China" campaign-season announcement. But the evidence of genocide is robust enough that delaying a determination or, worse, neglecting to issue one would be a significant policy failure.

However important the designation may be, it's important that the legal debate not eclipse the sheer human cost that the Chinese Communist party-state has exacted from the Uyghurs. As it makes its argument, the Trump administration should call attention to the stories of survivors such as Mihrigul Tursun, a former detainee who escaped to the United States. Her heartbreaking 2018 testimony to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China needs to be heard by those unaware of the Xinjiang genocide. It concludes with a simple exhortation that far too few people have taken to heart: "Please take an action against the Chinese officials responsible for my torture, and the death of my little boy, and the deaths of so many innocent Uyghurs in the camps."

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