

The right to physical and mental health in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

Introduction

Over one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups are believed to have been detained in political ‘re-education’ camps in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) since 2017. Witness reports raise extremely serious concerns regarding the physical and mental health impacts of these detentions.

Ill-treatment

CSW has gathered evidence to suggest that detainees in the XUAR have been mistreated or denied access to facilities in such a manner as to have extremely serious and long-lasting effects on their physical and mental health. Conditions in the camps are dangerously unsanitary and overcrowded; detainees are subject to beatings, sleep deprivation and solitary confinement.¹

In a series of interviews with Foreign Policy, a Uyghur, referred to as Iman, detailed his experience of being interrogated and detained by officials in Xinjiang², during which he suffered from nausea as a result of hunger, dehydration, and having a suffocating hood placed over his head. Iman also suffered a panic attack and feelings of dizziness. While in the camp Iman and his fellow detainees were banned from lying down to rest in the afternoons after mornings of marching and watching ‘re-education’ films, and at nights the lights were left on while they slept.

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), witnesses have reported seeing “detainees walking barefoot,” and that inmates were “not allowed clothes with buttons or metal zippers,” belts, shoelaces, or “even underwear” in some cases, despite average low temperatures of around 15 ° Fahrenheit (-10°C) at night in December.³

Another witness, Gulbahar Jelilova, who spent 15 months in a camp in the region told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) that she was beaten inside the camp and when she first entered she weighed 76 kilograms but within a month had lost more than 20 kilograms.⁴ Jelilova also detailed examples of punishments given to detainees including tying 5kg weights to their feet and handcuffing them.

Inadequate healthcare

In addition to the above, witnesses report that the level of healthcare available to detainees in the camps is either non-existent or inadequate. A report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) details witness testimonies indicating that detainees have been denied release even when they have been in clear need of medical treatment.⁵ One individual had a severe kidney condition which resulted in his urine turning red but he was not allowed out of the camp for surgery; another needed to have several tumours surgically removed from her body but instead of receiving treatment she was sent for a medical check-up and then returned to detention.

¹ CSW, ‘China: Mass arbitrary detentions in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)’, October 2018

² Foreign Policy, ‘A Summer Vacation in China’s Muslim Gulag’, 28 February 2018 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/28/a-summer-vacation-in-chinas-muslim-gulag/>

³ Radio Free Asia, ‘Uyghur Inmates Suffer Health Complications Due to Neglect in Xinjiang Detention Centers’, 18 January 2018 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/health-01182018171513.html>

⁴ ABC, ‘Uyghur woman details life inside Chinese ‘re-education camp’ in Xinjiang’, 8 January 2019 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-01-08/uyghur-woman-details-life-inside-chinese-re-education-camp/10697044>

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’ China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims”, 9 September 2018 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>

RFA also reports that Uyghurs in at least two detention centres in the region were suffering from medical conditions that they believe are being neglected by facility staff.⁶ One example was that of a woman named Patigul Dawut, who was ordered to serve six months in a local detention centre, despite suffering from a number of health complications. Dawut had had her pancreas removed, undergone heart surgery, and been in a car accident that required three additional surgeries. Her husband told RFA that he didn't believe she was receiving medication for any of these conditions.

Overcrowding

Witnesses have also indicated that conditions in the camps are overcrowded and unsanitary. One witness told HRW that they had to take it in turns to sleep, another reported that groups of 25 people were forced to share a space of approximately 18m². RFA received similar reports, with one witness claiming that detainees were forced to sleep on their sides as there was not enough space for them to lie flat.⁷ Another witness told CNN that police placed her in an overcrowded cell with more than 50 other women.⁸

Deaths in detention

CSW has also collated various media reports of detainees dying in the camps, particularly elderly detainees.

In February 2019 a Uyghur living overseas reported the death of his 70 year-old grandfather, Reman Idris, who he had lost contact with for three years.⁹ Idris reportedly died in a camp in the city of Kashgar. In April 2019 the same source added that his grandfather's brother, who was in his 60s, had also passed away.¹⁰

Media outlets, including RFA, The Economist and Endgadget, reported the death of a prominent Uyghur Islamic scholar, Muhammad Salih Hajim, at the age of 82 in January 2018. Salih is reported to have died in custody about 40 days after he was detained along with his daughter and other relatives.¹¹

In an interview with CNN, a former detainee named Mihrigul Tursun claimed she saw nine detainees die during the period she was in detention due to hostile conditions.¹² This included a 62 year-old woman named Gulsahan who spent at least six months in the detention centre and suffered from rashes and swollen legs and face.

During her detention Tursun also witnessed the death of a 23-year-old a mother of two named Padegun, who had spent thirteen months in prison and suffered from non-stop menstrual bleeding. Whilst confined in a small cell detainees were forced to take it in turns to stand while others slept. One night, at around 4am, Tursun reported that Padegun collapsed when it was her turn to stand. Police then came to the cell and dragged Padegun away by the feet.

In May 2018 RFA reported the death of an unnamed "elderly Uyghur woman" after her incarceration at a political re-education camp in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture.¹³ A source told RFA that she had died as a result of being "unable to cope with the pressure and terrible conditions" at the facility.

⁶ RFA, 'Uyghur Inmates Suffer Health Complications', 18 January 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/health-01182018171513.html>

⁷ Ibid

⁸ CNN, 'Uyghur refugee tells of death and fear inside China's Xinjiang camps', 18 January 2018 <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/18/asia/uyghur-china-detention-center-intl/index.html>

⁹ Twitter, Najmidin Reman @Najmidinn, 21 February 2019 <https://twitter.com/Najmidinn/status/1098710307722137600>

¹⁰ Twitter, Najmidin Reman @Najmidinn, 22 April 2019

¹¹ Radio Free Asia, 'Uyghur Muslim Scholar Dies in Chinese Police Custody', 29 January 2018 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-death-01292018180427.html>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Radio Free Asia, 'Elderly Uyghur Woman Dies in Detention in Xinjiang 'Political Re-Education Camp'', 24 May 2018 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/woman-05242018164854.html>

In June 2018 RFA reported that a 65 year-old Uyghur businessman named Abdulreshit Seley Hajim had died nine months after his incarceration in a camp.¹⁴ People who saw his corpse told Seley's brother that he had been hit on the head with a blunt object.

Lasting impacts

Former detainees claim that their experiences inside the camps have had lasting impacts on their physical and mental health. One former detainee told HRW "My health was very good [before] ... after the political education camp, my health has deteriorated.¹⁵ I [now] have headaches and my legs ache." He also reported that he suffered from memory loss, and thinking about his experiences rendered him "incapacitated" and unable to work. Another said: "My memory has gotten poor... I have inflamed joints and nose, as well as high blood pressure.... My psychological health was particularly impacted."

There is also a lasting impact on the families of those detained, who often have no information about their relatives' condition or whereabouts. One woman whose entire extended family was detained in the camps told CSW: "This whole situation is stressful and the impact on our work, physical and emotional state is horrific, it is a dreadful trauma." Other individuals interviewed by CSW said that female relatives whose husbands have been taken to the camps are struggling with daily hardships and financial and mental problems.

Recommendations:

- Together with other Special Procedures, issue a joint statement condemning China's use of re-education camps, and all forms of extra-legal detention, enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention, and publically call for an independent international fact-finding mission to the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.
- Investigate and monitor conditions in the camps and detention facilities in XUAR and publically condemn human rights violations impacting the physical and mental health of detainees.
- Urge China to release all detainees immediately and without condition.
- Urge the international community to consider sanctions against policymakers responsible for human rights abuses in XUAR, including provincial officials.
- Given the high risk of arbitrary detention and ill treatment for those returning to XUAR from overseas, urge Member States to ensure that Uyghurs and other individuals at risk of arbitrary detention and other human rights abuses are not forcibly deported to China.

¹⁴ Radio Free Asia, 'Uyghur Man Buried Amid Strict Security After Latest Xinjiang Reeducation Camp Death', 8 June 2018 <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/gulja-burial-06082018164250.html>

¹⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Eradicating Ideological Viruses", 9 September 2018