

The Rights of Older Persons in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR)

Introduction

There is evidence that older persons¹ are among those detained in camps the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Over one million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and members of other ethnic groups have been detained without charge in political re-education camps in XUAR since 2017. The strength of the evidence leaves no doubt that mass detentions are taking place in XUAR which violate domestic and international law.²

The Xinjiang Victims Database, a platform which collects testimonies from friends and relatives of people currently detained in the camps, has documented the detention 498 people over the age of 55, based on information provided in witness testimonies.³ CSW has noted that numerous individuals who are using the #MeTooUyghur hashtag on Twitter claim to have lost contact with relatives over the age of 60, and several others claim to have lost grandparents but do not specify their age. Media outlets have also reported that elderly detainees are being forced to learn Chinese characters in the camps.⁴

Witness reports

Witnesses interviewed by various media outlets and human rights organisations provide further evidence to suggest that the elderly are among the detained. A report published by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in September 2018 detailed interviews with five former detainees, all of whom informed HRW that “elderly people, in their 60s and 70s, and even 80s, were held in the camps.”⁵ Two former detainees added that some of the older persons detained also had disabilities or difficulties walking or seeing. A student and former resident of Xinjiang also told HRW that his relatives in the region had witnessed the arrest of approximately 20 women in their 60s in March 2018.

In October 2017 Radio Free Asia (RFA) presented testimonies detailing the detention of three individuals aged 64, 66 and 82.⁶ The testimonies were provided by individuals living and working in the region, including an instructor at a re-education camp in Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture’s Ghulja (Yining) county.

In an interview in October 2018 in Kazakhstan, Kaliolla, a 34-year-old ethnic Kazakh, told AFP that he’d lost contact with his mother, father and two younger brothers, who he believes were interned in one of the camps. He described his parents as “elderly and in ill health.”⁷

Deaths in detention

CSW has collated several reports of older persons dying as a result of their detention in Xinjiang.

¹ The UN refers to persons over 60 years of age as elderly or older persons. This is the demographic focused on in this report, although reference is also made to the Xinjiang Victims Database, which classifies older persons as over 55 years.

² CSW, China: Mass arbitrary detentions in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), October 2018

³ Xinjiang Victims Database, ‘Stats’, [accessed 8 May 2019] <https://shahit.biz/eng/#stats>

⁴ *The Guardian*, “My soul, where are you?: families of Muslims missing in China meet wall of silence”, 13 September 2018

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/13/uyghur-xinjiang-family-missing-china-kazakhstan>

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>

⁶ Radio Free Asia, ‘Elderly Among Thousands of Uyghurs Held in Xinjiang Re-Education Camps’, 26 October 2017

<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/elderly-10262017150900.html>

⁷ Hong Kong Free Press, “They are not livestock but people with rights’: Kazakh families torn apart in China’s Xinjiang crackdown”, 4 October 2018 <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2018/10/04/not-livestock-people-rights-kazakh-families-torn-apart-chinas-xinjiang-crackdown/>

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.⁸ The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) told RFA that the exact circumstances of Salih's death were unknown.

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.⁹ 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.

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.¹⁰ People who saw his corpse told Seley's brother that he had been hit on the head with a blunt object.

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.¹¹ 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.¹²

In an interview with CNN, a former detainee named Mihrigul Tursun claimed she saw nine detainees die due to hostile conditions.¹³ 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.

Outside the camps

CSW has also received a first-hand testimony from a Uyghur woman in Australia whose 75-year-old mother-in-law has been left uncared for and unsupported because all her other relatives are in camps. In an interview with CSW she said:

"My mother in law has become deaf and blind, her health is in bad shape and is deteriorating because she can't stop crying about all her children who have been locked up in the camps in XUAR, there is no one to take care of her and she has been left alone in her poor condition during the harsh winters and summers, suffering from hunger and pain."

In some cases, older persons also have to care for their young grandchildren because their parents are in camps. In February 2019, Bitter Winter, a magazine dedicated to monitoring human rights and freedom of religion or belief in China, published an interview with an elderly Hui woman living in Xinjiang who has been caring for her son's two children ever since his detention in April 2018.¹⁴ The woman told Bitter Winter that her ill-health has prevented her from being able to work and earn money, and that without her son there to earn an income she was uncertain how she would provide for the children in the future.

⁸ 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>

⁹ 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>

¹⁰ 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>

¹¹ Twitter, Najmidin Reman @Najmidinn, 21 February 2019 <https://twitter.com/Najmidinn/status/1098710307722137600>

¹² Twitter, Najmidin Reman @Najmidinn, 22 April 2019

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bitter Winter, 'Xinjiang Woman Struggles to Care for Her Grandchildren', 11 February 2019 <https://bitterwinter.org/woman-struggles-to-care-for-her-grandchildren/>

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.
- Urge China to release detainees immediately and without condition, including all older persons.
- Investigate and monitor cases of enforced disappearance and arbitrary detention in XUAR, as well as other human rights abuses, including violations of the rights of older persons.
- 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.