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“China’s War on Faith:” Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang and What We Can Do About It

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“China is at war with faith, but it is a war they will not win,” said Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback in his keynote speech on December 18, 2019, at a standing-room only panel discussion hosted by the Hudson Institute. The event, “[China’s Human Rights Abuses in Xinjiang and the U.S. Response](#),” came soon after the surfacing of leaked documents, collectively known as the China Cables or Xinjiang Papers, which the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) obtained in October 2019.

The “war on faith” to which the ambassador refers is the detention of over one million people, predominately Muslims belonging to the Uygur ethnic group, in Xinjiang, China since April 2017. Though the Chinese government officially calls them “re-education” centers, in secret documents the government uses the term “concentration” to describe the camps. Hudson Institute panelists unanimously agreed that the centers are concentration camps.

Panelist Nury Turkel, who was born in a re-education camp in China at the height of the cultural revolution, explained that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) characterizes normal Muslim religious expressions as an “illness” that must be “cured” through a “painful procedure” of “re-education” and “transformation.” This “transformation” takes the form of human rights abuses including internment, [torture, rape, medical experimentation](#), long-term separation of parents and children, and forced labor. Muslims are forced to eat pork and drink alcohol. Overall, Turkel says, the human rights violations are happening “on a scale not seen since the Holocaust.”

The China Cables, authored by the Chinese government, use the words “concentration” and “collective punishment” to describe the camps. This is evidence, Turkel explains, of the Chinese government’s “true intentions—systematic punishment and indoctrination.”

Panelist Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, the lead reporter at ICIJ, explained that the CCP uses artificial intelligence, facial recognition cameras, and constant surveillance of its citizens as part of “predictive policing” to identify targets for “re-education.” She cited one of the leaked documents, which reveals that within one week, the computer algorithms identified 24,000 individuals. These names were sent to local police, who “rounded up” 15,000 of the individuals and placed them in camps with no formal court proceeding or means of appeal.

Panelist Adrian Zenz, who [recently published an op-ed on the subject](#), added that detainees are often male heads of households and their sons and daughters. In certain regions, fully half of the heads of households have been interned.

The AI-powered policing, “has enabled, as we saw in World War II, separation of moral decisions from commands, which makes human rights violations on a massive scale much more [possible],” said Allen-Ebrahimian.

Turkel echoed her sentiment later in the discussion. “At the height of Nazi [concentration camps], 700,000 people were detained,” he said, emphasizing that China currently detains over one million people.

Detainees are tested regularly to see if they have been sufficiently “re-educated.” Those who score well enough “graduate” and are released. Those who don’t risk not only more abuse in the camp, but prison sentences. The CCP sentenced one man to ten years in prison for exhorting his fellow Muslims not to watch pornography and to pray regularly.

The CCP’s violence goes beyond the camps. Event attendee and analyst Peter Humphrey noted that the CCP has bulldozed hundreds of mosques and cemeteries across Xinjiang. “Even if they were to release everyone in the camps,” he asked, “what would they have to go back to? Their ancestors have been bulldozed.”

This observation highlights a key point brought up by Zenz, who stated, “The international community has not yet clearly defined genocide as not just the destruction of lives, but the destruction of identity.” He says the UN should clearly list and define genocide and apply those definitions to Xinjiang.

Zenz continued that in light of the “clear evidence” and “hard evidence” of the CCP’s “thought process” and “method” in carrying out genocide, now is the time for the international community to act. “It is deeply frustrating to see that what’s happening in Xinjiang is testing the conscience of the world,” Zenz said.

Ambassador Brownback connected China’s “war on faith” with its human rights abuses in Xinjiang. “When a country doesn’t [respect] freedom of religion, other rights are impinged, including freedom of assembly, speech, and freedom of movement.” In cooperation with the UN, Brownback is in the process of organizing and launching the International Religious Freedom Alliance. Set to launch early this year, the alliance will be the first ever intergovernmental organization dedicated to religious freedom.

“Those people don’t need the government re-programming their minds, monitoring their daily lives,” Brownback said. “They need—and deserve—freedom.” In the coming year, the International Religious Freedom Alliance will call on the CCP to release “all those arbitrarily detained.” Brownback concluded, “We will continue to push back on China’s war on faith.”

In the past five months, Mike Pompeo has made over 20 public statements about the crisis in Xinjiang. And on December 2, 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Uyghur Act. The bipartisan bill includes sanctions on individuals in the CCP and trade bans with Xinjiang. Though Zenz points out that additional bills are needed to target specific issues—including forced labor—the Uyghur Act is a step in the right direction. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Minority Leader Chuck Schumer need to come together and act decisively to put the bill up for vote in the Senate. Zenz urged interested individuals to call them.

As Turkel noted, one of the problems is that the general public doesn't know what China is doing. This lack of awareness must change. China's war on faith merits sustained attention in our conversations, social media engagement, and advocacy as well as resolute action by decisionmakers in Washington, D.C. and beyond.

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