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CHINA: China detaining and sentencing Uyghur Imams en masse, UHRP reveals

UHRP (13.05.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3ohpXvy> – The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), in partnership with [Justice for All](#), has released a [new report](#) detailing the mass detention of Uyghur and other Turkic Muslim imams in East Turkistan, and attempts by the Chinese government to cut off the transmission of religious knowledge across generations.

“The wholesale round-up of imams exposes the Chinese government’s intention: to destroy our faith and traditions, once and for all,” said UHRP Executive Director Omer Kanat. “Uyghur and other Turkic imams are the custodians of religious scholarship and teaching. Eliminating religious teachers is a weapon for eliminating Islam from our homeland.”

The report, *Islam Dispossessed: China's Persecution of Uyghur Imams and Religious Figures*, presents a dataset of 1,046 Turkic imams and other religious figures from East Turkistan detained in camps or imprisoned for their association with religious teaching and community leadership since 2014.

The dataset reveals that of the 1,046 recorded cases, 428 have been sent to formal prisons, including 304 sentenced to prison terms. Of the cases with sentencing information, 96 percent have received prison terms of five years or more, and 25 percent were sentenced to 20 years or more, often on unclear charges.

Another 202 religious figures have been detained in camps, 18 have died while in detention or in prison, or shortly thereafter, and incomplete data for the remaining cases likely indicate that these individuals continue to be held indefinitely, or have received sentences that remain unreported.

The dataset confirms that hundreds of religious figures have been sentenced, without due process, to prison terms for quotidian religious practice and expression protected under Chinese law and internationally recognized human rights treaties. Imams have been sentenced for "illegal" religious teaching (often to children), prayer outside a state-approved mosque, the possession of "illegal" religious materials, and communication or travel abroad.

The dataset includes cases of prison sentences of 15 years or more for "teaching others to pray," "studying for six months in Egypt," "refusing to hand in [a] Quran book to be burned," and a life sentence for "spreading the faith and for organizing people."

The figures presented are not comprehensive, given extreme secrecy and lack of transparency in the Uyghur Region, and very likely represent a small fraction of the total number of religious figures detained. Nonetheless, the data provides an alarming indication of the scale and severity of the Chinese government's persecution of religious figures since 2014.

UHRP interviewed Uyghur imams abroad who described their experience of having been persistently watched, followed, scrutinized, and being given detailed orders controlling all their work. These imams fled the country when the controls reached the point where they felt that they could no longer play a positive role for their congregation and were at increasing risk of detention themselves.

“China’s persecution of imams stretches back decades, but it wasn’t until 2016 that the screws were tightened even further and thousands were likely arrested and sentenced,” said UHRP Senior Program Officer, and the report’s author, Peter Irwin.

In addition to the arbitrary detention of religious figures, authorities have prohibited the teaching of religion at all education levels; banned the use of traditional Islamic names like Muhammad and Medina for Uyghur children; banned long beards for Uyghur men and headscarves for women; instituted an “anti-halal” campaign to prevent the labeling of food and other products this way; criminalized Hajj pilgrimage without government approval; and adopted legislation broadly defining quotidian religious practices as “extremist,” which a group of UN independent experts [urged](#) to be repealed in its entirety.

The current campaign targeting Uyghur and other Turkic peoples bears a striking resemblance to the horrors of the Cultural Revolution as it was experienced in East Turkistan. While forms of repression share some similarities, the scale and scope of what is happening today makes this current campaign distinct, particularly owing to the ability of the state to utilize sophisticated technologies to “predict” criminality and infiltrate even the most intimate social unit, the family home.

The Turkic peoples of East Turkistan are facing their darkest era in decades, as the devastating fate of Uyghur religious figures demonstrates.

United Nations member states should [establish](#) an official Commission of Inquiry to investigate rights abuses. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights should simultaneously make use of her independent monitoring and reporting mandate to investigate and report to the Human Rights Council with her findings.

Governments should urge the Chinese government, at every possible opportunity, to end its campaign of mass detention and release those imprisoned without due process. Governments should also provide support to Uyghurs currently under threat of refoulement or retaliation in third countries; form, strengthen, and mobilize international coalitions to deter further rights violations; and implement commitments on atrocity and genocide prevention through bilateral and multilateral diplomacy.

The U.S. Congress should also pass [H.Res.317](#) and [S.Res.131](#) without delay, providing a strong Congressional mandate for urgent U.S. action at the UN level.

Photo: UHRP

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