



**In the shadow of the Olympics limelight
400,000 Uyghur girls and young women
are being torn away from their families
and deported from rural areas in West China
to factories in East China**

Last week, the Olympic Torch Relay went through Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region but the people of the region were strongly advised to stay at home during their Olympic torch relay "for safety reasons" and to tune into television instead.

It is sure that the stay-at-home message was intended to avoid any public demonstration of discontentment and to give the international media a nice - but false - image of the general harmonious support to the Olympics and Beijing's policy in the region.

Xinjiang has eight million ethnic Uighurs, most of whom are Muslims. The Chinese government has repeatedly demonized Uyghur rights defenders and accused them of having a separatist agenda and of being involved in terrorist activities.

The Uighurs are a Turkic people, many of whom live in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, also called East Turkistan, in north-western China. They have a distinct culture, religion, and language from the Han Chinese that make up the majority of the population in China. The Uighurs founded an East Turkistan Republic in 1944 with the support of the Soviet Union, but after communism and Mao Zedong came to power in 1949 China revoked this independence and took over the territory and its people.¹

Since then the Chinese government has oppressed and abused the Uighur population in China. Their human rights are systematically abused through actions such as the repression of culture, language and religion; population transfers to and from the region and the takeover of the economy by Han

Chinese; arrests of and lack of due process for those considered to be "separatist" or "terrorist" elements; the brutal treatment and torture of Uighurs in Chinese prisons; and the harsh treatment of Uighurs extradited from Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on the basis of the Shanghai Five Agreement². Each of these human rights abuses will now be discussed in more detail.

Human rights abuses and cultural genocide

One of the efforts on the part of the Chinese government to repress Uighur culture and language is the **restrictions** it has placed **on schools**. The burning of Uighur books has been reported³ along with the closure of Uighur language schools in favour of ones that teach in Chinese.⁴ Human Rights Watch has documented that educational authorities have been ordered to "clean up and reorganize the schools, their leaders, and the teaching body so as to turn schools into a stronghold against separatism and infiltration."⁵ Along with this, all expression of religion in schools, including women wearing headscarves, is banned.⁶ According to a report by Amnesty International, the Chinese government is not distinguishing between "violent acts and peaceful expression of dissent, or social, cultural or religious identity"⁷ when it punishes Uighurs for expressing their identity and culture even in peaceful ways.

In a further attempt to dilute Uighur identity, the Chinese government has been **transferring Han Chinese into Xinjiang**. In 2005 Human Rights Watch estimated the population of Han Chinese in Xinjiang to be 40% of the total, compared to 6% when the migration campaign began in 1949.⁸ The majority of Uighurs are farmers who do not speak Chinese. There have been reports that the Han Chinese are taking jobs and receiving government assistance while unemployment and economic discrimination are problems among the Uighurs. It is also asserted that the Chinese settlers are taking away farmers' lands without permission.⁹ Further troubling is the claim that **forced abortions** and sterilizations are taking place among Uighur women when the infant mortality rate in that province is already higher than China's average.¹⁰

400 000 Uighur girls and young women deported from West to East China

Since June 2006, the Chinese government has also been sending single, teenage Uighur girls to the east of the country to work in factories in the name of "providing employment opportunities and generating income" for the poor farming families who live in East Turkestan.

According to a report by Uyghur Human Rights Project, they want to resettle around **400,000 girls** in this manner.¹¹ Lured by promises of employment and payment, the girls are still also forced and threatened into leaving. The situation becomes worse upon arrival, with long work days, unpredictable payment schedules, and the prohibition on speaking Uighur.¹² The report further states that "in the Uyghur culture, it is a most humiliating and provocative act to take Uyghur women against their will from the Uyghur community without paying due respect for the way of life and values of the Uyghur people" and that "most Uyghurs view the transfers as just this type of act."¹³

Uyghur girls and young women do not have the choice. Their parents do not have the choice. They cannot refuse this transfer.

In order to "facilitate" such large-scale transfers, local county and village officials, backed by regional and autonomous governments and through the use of aggressive propaganda and even coercive measures, have been heavily involved

in forcing Uyghur farmers to allow their daughters to be recruited and transferred to China's eastern provinces to 'work.' Chinese officials have admitted that they forced farmers to send their daughters to 'work' in China's eastern provinces because they would have been removed from their posts if they had refused to do so.

"Whomever obstructs the Uyghur public from working in the exterior will become the *criminal* of Kashgar and the *criminal* of the Uyghur people," said the authorities.

Village officials threatened farmers with the confiscation of their farming lands and the destruction of their houses. The farmers' daughters were threatened with the confiscation of their resident registration cards and the refusal to issue them marriage certificates.

In order to entice Uyghur parents to send their daughters to China's eastern provinces, they are told that their daughters will be given 500 yuan (approx. US\$65) per month in the early months of the training period and then 900 to 1,100 yuan (approx. US\$125 to \$135) for their work per month. However, once the young women are transferred, the treatment they experience is completely different from what they have been promised. Their salaries are not paid on time. They are forced to work up to 12 hours each day. They are not even allowed to speak in Uyghur, either at work or in their free time. In addition, they are not allowed to freely return to their hometowns.

The Xinjiang Daily reported on March 20, 2007 that there had been 240,000 instances of the transfer of the local labor force from the Kashgar Region to China's eastern provinces in 2006 into Beijing, Tianjin, Jiangsu, Qingdao, Shandong, Zhejiang, and other locations. Since Han Chinese girls living in East Turkistan are not recruited and transferred to work under this new policy, it is assumed that the final goal is to further disrupt the demographic makeup of East Turkistan by reducing the number of potential mothers in the local Uyghur community.

Traditionally, the Uyghur people do not send their children, especially young females, to distant lands, except to get a higher education. The transfer of young Uyghur women has therefore become a major concern among Uyghurs, not only among farmers but also among Uyghur intellectuals, both in East Turkistan and abroad. Many Uyghurs see such transfers as an attack on the honor of Uyghur women and the dignity of Uyghur men. Many also see this as one of the most humiliating and provocative policies to date on the part of PRC government authorities.

At present, local and central government authorities continue to aggressively implement a policy of transferring young Uyghur women despite Uyghur resistance and resentment to the policy. It seems unlikely that the PRC government will soon change the policy and stop the transfer but this policy has already backfired and unnecessarily increased tensions between the Uyghurs and the government. The further pursuit of this imprudent policy would be perceived as an extreme insult by the Uyghur people in East Turkistan, justifiably exacerbating their feelings of repression and their mistrust of Chinese government authorities. Continuation of the policy would certainly not bring about genuine "ethnic harmony" in East Turkistan, as PRC authorities have recently touted as one of their primary goals. Instead, it would only deepen the sense of extreme mistrust of government officials felt by the Uyghur community, further marginalize the Uyghur people and possibly lead to social unrest.

Recommendations

In light of the ethnic marginalization and Uyghur mistrust of government officials in East Turkestan and the deeply offensive nature of the large-scale transfer of Uyghur girls into China's eastern provinces, the Chinese government should be urged by the international community to:

- stop the cultural genocide perpetrated against the Uyghur community
- immediately stop the implementation of this policy
- immediately return the Uyghur girls to their hometowns
- compensate them for their work and travel expenses
- send them to Uyghur schools or offer them jobs in their region of origin
- punish officials who forcibly transferred Uyghur girls against their will.

¹ "East Turkistan under PRC rule: Devastation of Uyghurs."

² Shanghai Five state parties: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan

³ Amnesty International, "People's Republic of China Uighurs fleeing persecution as China wages its 'war on terror'," *Amnesty International*, 7 July 2004, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/021/2004/en> (accessed 18 June 2008).

⁴ "East Turkistan under PRC rule: Devastation of Uyghurs."

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang."

⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang."

⁷ Amnesty International, "People's Republic of China Uighurs fleeing persecution as China wages its 'war on terror'."

⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang."

⁹ Amnesty International, "People's Republic of China Uighurs fleeing persecution as China wages its 'war on terror'."

¹⁰ "East Turkistan under PRC rule: Devastation of Uyghurs."

¹¹ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Transfer of Young Uyghur Women into Eastern China," *Uyghur Human Rights Project*, 1-2.

¹² Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Transfer of Young Uyghur Women into Eastern China," 4-5.

¹³ Uyghur Human Rights Project, "Transfer of Young Uyghur Women into Eastern China," 7.