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'I Hold China Accountable': Uyghur Families Demand Answers Over Fire That Triggered Protests

By Rebecca Wright, Ivan Watson and Enwer Erdem, CNN, 2022.12.1

For more than five years, Sharapat Mohamad Ali and her brother Mohamad had been unable to contact their family in far western China, where the government has been accused of incarcerating up to 2 million Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities in internment camps.

They believe their father and brother are among those detained in the Xinjiang region, so have long been primed for bad news. But when they finally received word about their family on Friday, it was even worse than they might have imagined.

Friends alerted them to social media images that showed the bodies of their mother, Kamarnisahan Abdulrahman, and their 13-year-old sister Shehide, who had died along with three of their other siblings when a fire ripped through an apartment block in

Urumqi, Xinjiang's capital, on November 24.

"I learned the awful news about my family from social media," Sharapat, 25, told CNN through tears on a video call from Turkey, where she and her brother moved to study in early 2017.

"My mom was such a wonderful woman, she loved to help people," her brother added.

The tragedy has been blamed on a Covid-19 lockdown that appears to have hampered both the efforts of rescue services to enter the building and those of residents trying to flee – and was the catalyst for protests that swept multiple Chinese cities at the weekend as people vented their anger at the government's uncompromising zero-Covid policy.

The strategy, which relies on mass testing, lockdowns and digital tracking to stamp out outbreaks, has failed to contain more

contagious variants as China clings to its draconian approach long after the rest of the world has largely moved on.

In Urumqi, which has a population of nearly 4 million, a strict Covid lockdown has been imposed since August, with most residents banned from leaving their homes for more than 100 days.

China's state-run news agency Xinhua claimed the fire killed 10 people and injured nine, but reports from local residents suggest the real toll is far higher.

A day after the blaze, Urumqi local government officials denied that the city's Covid policies were to blame for the deaths, adding that an investigation was underway.

Meanwhile, the local and central governments have largely avoided acknowledging the protests directly.

On Saturday, the Urumqi government said it would ease the lockdown "in stages," suggesting this was because it had "basically eliminated Covid cases" – despite the city continuing to log around 100 cases per day.

On Monday, Beijing's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said China "has been making adjustments" to its Covid policy "based on realities on the ground."

A day later, he responded to a question about the arrest and beating of a BBC journalist at a protest in Shanghai by saying the police had "asked people who had gathered at a crossroads to leave." The ruling Communist Party's committee on domestic security also made an oblique reference to "hostile forces" that it suggested were responsible for destabilizing the social order.

This week, a heavy police presence has discouraged protesters from gathering, while authorities in some cities have adopted

surveillance tactics used previously in Xinjiang to intimidate those who took to the streets.

As the Chinese security apparatus smothers dissent, the fire victims' families are demanding answers.

Kamarnisahan Abdulrahman's nephew Abdul Hafiz, who lives in Switzerland, said Chinese authorities had "left people helpless in a dangerous situation."

"I want to hold China accountable for this tragedy," he said. "We all are suffering very much."

Piecing together a tragedy

From nearly 3,000 miles away in Istanbul, where there is a large Uyghur diaspora, relatives are still trying to piece together exactly what happened in the Tengritagh district of Urumqi – known as Tianshan in Chinese.

Ali Abbas, a Uyghur who left Xinjiang in 2017, owns the apartment on the 15th floor where the fire began.

He told CNN on the phone from Turkey that the fire was sparked by an electrical fault when his granddaughter's tablet device was charging. The fire spread swiftly through the home, which was filled with wooden furniture, despite attempts by his daughter and their neighbor to douse the flames.

Abbas, 54, said the building's community staff then arrived and ordered them to evacuate, accompanying them out of the building via the elevator.

But soon after that, the building's power went down and the elevator stopped working.

Abbas said that under the lockdown rules, households where someone had tested positive within the past month were locked inside their homes. People in other households



were able to leave their apartments, but could not leave the building itself without the help of the community workers.

Chinese state-run tabloid the Global Times reported that a local official in Urumqi denied that the doors of the building were locked, saying “residents have been allowed to walk out on a staggered basis since November 20.” Instead, he blamed residents for being

“unable to protect themselves as they were not familiar with the safety exits.”

As the fire spread upward, residents trapped on higher floors posted desperate pleas for help on the Chinese messaging app WeChat, with one woman leaving voice messages saying her family was running out of oxygen. Community workers replied, telling people to cover their mouths with wet towels until the



Kamarnisahan Abdulrahman with three of her children who died in the fire -- Shehide 13, Abdurahman 9, Nehdiye 5.

emergency services arrived.

But that help came too late for some.

A video of the aftermath of the blaze shared on Douyin – the Chinese version of TikTok – shows workers in hazmat suits inspecting a scene of blackened devastation.

“What happened to my neighbors is really a big disaster,” Abbas said, breaking down. “I would like to express my sincere sorrow to all Uyghur people, to all those loved ones who lost their family members. I sincerely ask for their forgiveness.”

Killed by zero-Covid?

But for the families of those who perished, the blame for this tragedy does not lie simply with an electrical fault.

Rather, they say, it is the pandemic policy that hampered an effective evacuation of the building.

“(My family) became victims of the Chinese government’s zero-Covid policy,” said Abdul Hafiz, 27. “Even the doors of houses were locked from outside. At least if my family could go out of the door or to the roof of the



building to rescue themselves, they would have survived.”

The families also say the rescue should have been quicker because the fire station and local hospital are just a few hundred meters away from the building.

Xinhua reported that the fire broke out at around 7:49 p.m. local time on Thursday, and was extinguished almost three hours later at around 10:35 p.m.

Videos show the fire truck aiming a stream of water toward the building, but being too far back to reach the blaze – apparently due to lockdown restrictions at street level.

An Urumqi local official did acknowledge that the fire truck couldn't get close enough to the building, but said this was because “the road leading to the building was occupied by other vehicles.”

Sharapat, whose mother and siblings were on the 19th floor, said her family succumbed to toxic smoke.

“The fire started from the 15th floor, and it poisoned my family members from the smoke,” she said. “The government did not stop the fire in time.”

Sharapat and others also believe the ethnicity of the victims played a part in their deaths. While China has used similar lockdown strategies in other parts of the country – with videos circulating on social media showing people being locked into their homes by welded bars and metal wires – they feel the lockdown in Urumqi has been unusually severe. They also believe that had the fire not been in a Uyghur neighborhood the rescue efforts would have been more swift.

The fire in Xinjiang has been covered in state media outlets and videos have also spread through social media, fueled in part by the

unease over the Covid restrictions.

CNN has sent a detailed request to Chinese authorities asking whether Covid measures and policies toward the ethnic minority population were at fault for what happened. No response has been received.

‘If we went back now, we’d be in jail’

The deaths in Urumqi have not only fueled protests in mainland Chinese cities, they have also given rise to a surge of anger from Uyghur families who say they have been suffering under China's policies for years.

The United States and other nations have described the Chinese government's actions and camps in Xinjiang as constituting a genocide. China denies genocide, or any human rights abuses, in Xinjiang. It insists the camps are vocational and designed to fight religious extremism.

But CNN has spoken to dozens of Uyghurs and other minorities over the past five years, along with a former Chinese police officer turned whistleblower. Their reports of the camps in Xinjiang included torture, sexual violence, and indoctrination.

Their families who were left at home have reported being subject to forced family separations, surveillance of their communications with relatives abroad, and officials acting as “relatives” being placed in their homes to monitor their behavior.

A previous CNN investigation found that people were being sent to the camps for supposed “offenses” like having too many children or showing signs of being a Muslim – such as not drinking alcohol or having a long beard.

Siblings Sharapat and Mohamad believe the reason their father and brother were not at home when the fire broke out is because they



are currently in one of the camps.

CNN has asked the Chinese government for details on the whereabouts of the two men.

Neither Sharapat nor Mohamad feel safe to fly home, fearing they too would be taken away. When they left Xinjiang in early 2017, the youngest of their six siblings Nehdiye, 5, who died in the fire, had not yet been born.

“We want to attend the funeral of our family members, but if we went back now, China will put us in jail or even torture us,” said Mohamad, 22.

Too late for solidarity?

At the same time as the crackdown on the Uyghurs, large numbers of ethnic Han – which represent the vast majority of the mainland Chinese population – have moved into Xinjiang, encouraged to move there by government policies offering them business opportunities, affordable housing and favorable tax policies.

This has fueled ethnic tensions that have been made worse by the perception of many

Uyghurs that Han Chinese communities have benefited from their plight.

Beijing has claimed that the economic strategy in Xinjiang is designed to promote poverty alleviation in the poorest part of China.

In September 2021, China’s leader Xi Jinping said policies in the region were “completely correct” and “must be adhered to in the long term,” adding that “the sense of gain, happiness, and security” among all ethnic groups had increased.

After the fire in Urumqi, Han Chinese from across the country took part in vigils held for the victims. But for many members of the Uyghur population, traumatized by years of brutality and oppression, this was a show of solidarity that came too little, too late.

“I don’t think that the Chinese people are protesting for us,” Abdul Hafiz said. “They are doing it for their own interests.”

“Since 2016, millions of people were detained in camps,” Hafiz said. “At that time, they did not stand up, they did not help, and they even denied it.”

Protests Roar Around the World Against China’s Authorities

By Euro News, 2022.12.1

Strikes are ongoing in several countries over Chinese authorities’ restrictive zero-COVID policy.

Protests in New York City

Hundreds of protesters gathered outside the Chinese consulate in New York on Tuesday, echoing a wave of demonstrations against Chinese authorities’ restrictive “zero-COVID” policy that has swept across China.

They chanted slogans in both English and Mandarin including “We don’t want dictatorships, we want elections!” and “Step down, Xi Jinping”.

Protests in Hong Kong

Hong Kong’s security minister on Wednesday warned the city’s protests against China’s anti-virus restrictions were threatening national security.

Chris Tang said some events on university campuses and the city's streets had attempted to incite others to target China's central government in the name of commemorating a deadly fire in the country's far west last

were blocked by COVID restrictions.

Protests in Istanbul

Dozens of Uyghur demonstrators gathered outside the Chinese consulate in Istanbul



week. "This is not a coincidence but highly organized," he told reporters at the legislature.

Protests erupted in major mainland cities over the weekend after the blaze that killed at least 10 in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang region, prompted angry questions about whether firefighters or victims trying to escape

Wednesday to protest a fire last week in China's northwestern Xinjiang region that killed 10 people and injured nine.

The fire in an apartment building came amid stringent lockdowns that have left many residents in the area stuck in their homes for more than three months.

Forced Uyghur Labor is Being Used in China's Solar Panel Supply Chain, Researchers Say

By Aaron Mok, Business Insider, 2022.12.1

The global solar panel manufacturing industry has a human rights problem, according to new research from the Breakthrough Institute that draws from more than 200 government documents, media reports, and academic

papers.

The research report alleges that Uyghurs, a Muslim minority group based in Xinjiang, China, have been forced to produce polysilicon, a key material used to make



solar panels, under state-sponsored labor transfer programs over the last two years. These arrangements have coerced minority workers into factory jobs by the “implicit” threat of arrest and even imprisonment, according to researchers.

The Biden Administration called China’s treatment of the Uyghurs “genocide” in its 2021 human rights report.

China’s polysilicon factories are concentrated in the Xinjiang region and were responsible for more than 42% of the world’s total production of raw solar materials last year, according to the research.

GCL Technology Holdings Limited, which researchers estimate produces 8.4% of China’s solar-grade polysilicon, and other

Xinjiang-based manufacturer doesn’t employ any Uyghur workers and said China has no need to supply workers through the labor-transfer program.

“Why do people think a government will pay money to sponsor a company to use force labor?” He wrote in an email. “What does the govt get?”

GCL Technology Holdings Limited, East Hope Group, and Xinte Energy didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Uyghur workers are expected to work under potentially dangerous conditions with low pay, researchers say

Manufacturers in Xinjiang specialize in upstream production, which includes the mining, smelting, and the slicing of silicon



companies helped transfer more than 1,800 workers in total from the city of Hotan and asked that they participate in military-style training, according to the report. Other polysilicon manufacturers like East Hope Group, Daqo New Energy Corporation, and Xinte Energy based in Xinjiang were also found to employ forced labor, according to the research report.

Kevin He, a spokesperson of Daqo New Energy Corporation, told Insider that the

into wafers that are used in photovoltaics that convert sunlight into energy, according to the research report. The rest of the solar panel parts, like solar cells and solar panels, are assembled in other plants across China, the researchers wrote.

The study said that while there’s not enough data to show how many Uyghurs are part of the solar factory workforce, transferred workers are often relocated hundreds of

kilometers away from their hometowns, separated from their families and children.

Workers are expected to work long hours under potentially dangerous conditions with low pay, according to the report, and are forced to undertake a mandatory political indoctrination as part of their re-education process.

The researchers allege Uyghurs also work at coal-powered electricity plants on-site and across the region that power the polysilicon facilities. Researchers also wrote that photos they obtained show that workers do not wear personal protective equipment needed to protect themselves from occupational hazards.

Solar manufacturing companies are “complicit in the Chinese Communist Party’s wider systematic campaign of oppression against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other minoritized peoples in the Xinjiang region,” the researchers concluded.

China’s dominance of the global solar supply chain could slow down the world’s transition to clean energy

Many countries, including the US, rely on Chinese imports for most of its panels, according to Bloomberg. China is responsible for nearly 80% of global the solar manufacturing market in all stages of production, according to data from the International Energy Agency. China’s solar exports reportedly increased by 60% to \$28 billion dollars last year, according to China’s ministry of industry and information technology.

China’s dominance of the global solar market may expose the solar supply chain to a greater risk of disruptions from geopolitical disputes, extreme weather, and shifts in

the economy, Seaver Wang, a researcher involved in the study, told Insider.

China’s influence could also stifle the global expansion of the solar industry if domestic manufacturers outside of China are unable to compete with the low-cost labor in Xinjiang in the long-run, Wang said. It could even hurt the reputations of the solar photovoltaic sector, which could sway investors away from funding enterprises they deem unethical and reduce the overall shift from fossil fuels to solar, he said.

The US passed a law in June of 2021 banning some of the imports of solar materials from the Xinjiang region, a move that could make it more expensive for the Americans to switch to solar energy. The U.K and Australia have also considered banning Xinjiang exports, although no moves have been made.

Researchers call for solar companies to stop doing business with Xinjiang manufacturers

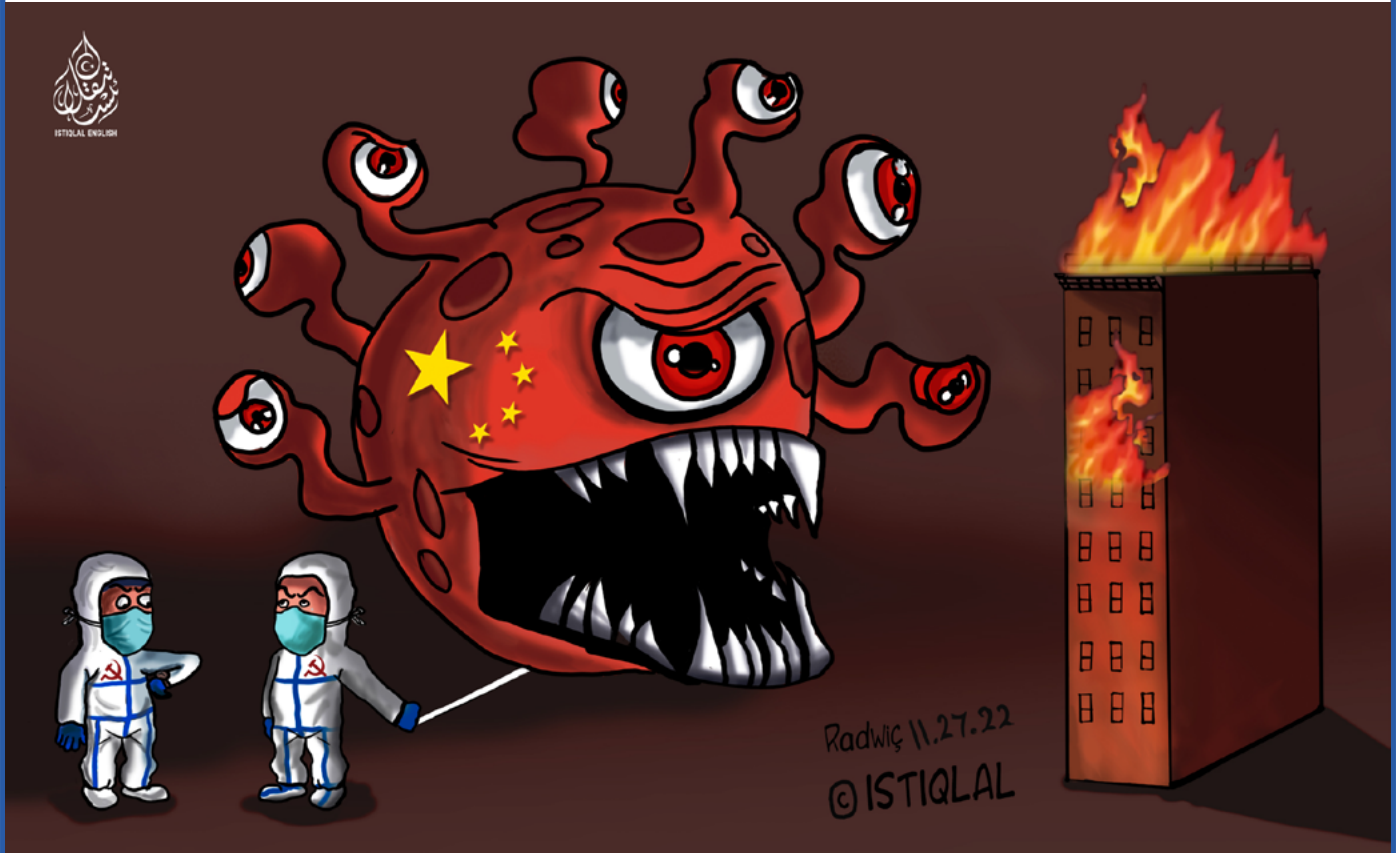
Even though solar industry groups have adopted protocols and signed pledges to vet products that violate labor laws, researchers found that these moves haven’t done enough to stop producers at the end of the supply chain from purchasing raw materials from Xinjiang, Wang said.

Researchers urge energy companies to stop doing business with Xinjiang-based manufacturers. They also call for governments to create public programs like Biden’s plan to triple US-based solar manufacturing by 2024.

“We think it is key for the clean tech industry to send a strong signal now that it will not tolerate sourcing from Xinjiang-based manufacturers complicit in the region’s oppressive policies,” Wang said.

A massive protest was organized by over 30 organizations in Türkiye in front of the Chinese consulate in Istanbul against China's genocide crime against the people of East Turkistan, especially its recent crime, which was the leading cause of the death of dozens of Uyghurs in the Urumqi fire.





The Chinese regime's so-called "zero-covid" policy in East Turkistan is a pretext, the latest massacre in Urumqi is the real purpose.