

The Faces from China's Uyghur Detention Camps

By John Sudworth, BBC, 2022-05-24

Thousands of photographs from the heart of China's highly secretive system of mass incarceration in Xinjiang, as well as a shoot-to-kill policy for those who try to escape, are among a huge cache of data hacked from police computer servers in the region.

The Xinjiang Police Files, as they're being called, were passed to the BBC earlier this year. After a months-long effort to investigate and authenticate them, they can be shown to offer significant new insights into the internment of the region's Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities.

Their publication coincides with the recent arrival in China of the United Nations Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, for a controversial visit to Xinjiang, with critics concerned that her itinerary will be under the tight control of the government.

The cache reveals, in unprecedented detail, China's use of "re-education" camps and

formal prisons as two separate but related systems of mass detention for Uyghurs - and seriously calls into question its well-honed public narrative about both.

The government's claim that the re-education camps built across Xinjiang since 2017 are nothing more than "schools" is contradicted by internal police instructions, guarding rosters and the never-before-seen images of detainees.

And its widespread use of terrorism charges, under which many thousands more have been swept into formal prisons, is exposed as a pretext for a parallel method of internment, with police spreadsheets full of arbitrary, draconian sentences.

The documents provide some of the strongest evidence to date for a policy targeting almost any expression of Uyghur identity, culture or Islamic faith - and of a chain of command running all the way up to the Chinese leader,

Xi Jinping.

The hacked files contain more than 5,000 police photographs of Uyghurs taken between January and July 2018.

Using other accompanying data, at least 2,884 of them can be shown to have been detained.

And for those listed as being in a re-education camp, there are signs that they are not the willing “students” China has long-claimed them to be.

Some of the re-education camp photos show guards standing by, armed with batons.

Yet claims of coercion have been consistently denied by China’s most senior officials.

“The truth is the education and training centres in Xinjiang are schools that help people free themselves from extremism,” Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in 2019.

Many have been detained just for ordinary, outward signs of their Islamic faith or for visiting countries with majority Muslim populations.

With the threat of physical force again visible in the background, this woman’s photo highlights the widespread use of “guilt by association”.

Documents describe her son as having “strong religious leanings” because he doesn’t drink alcohol or smoke. As a result, he was jailed for 10 years on terrorism charges.

But she appears on a list of “relatives of the detained” - among the thousands placed under suspicion because of the “crimes” of their families.

This composite image contains 2,884 photographs of detainees from the cache.

The photos provide a unique visual record of the way whole swathes of Uyghur society have been swept up - into both camps and prisons - person by person.



The youngest, Rahile Omer, was only 15 at the time of her detention.



The oldest, Anihan Hamit, was 73.

The Xinjiang Police Files - the title being used for the cache by a consortium of international journalists of which the BBC is part - contain tens of thousands of images and documents.

They include classified speeches by senior officials; internal police manuals and personnel information; the internment details for more than 20,000 Uyghurs; and photographs from highly sensitive locations.

The source of the files claims to have hacked, downloaded and decrypted them from a number of police computer servers in Xinjiang, before passing them to Dr Adrian Zenz, a scholar at the US-based Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation who has

previously been sanctioned by the Chinese government for his influential research on Xinjiang.

Dr Zenz then shared them with the BBC, and although we were able to contact the source directly, they were unwilling to reveal anything about their identity or whereabouts.

None of the hacked documents is dated beyond the end of 2018, possibly as the result of a directive issued in early 2019 tightening Xinjiang's encryption standards. That may have placed any subsequent files beyond the reach of the hacker.

Dr Zenz has written a peer-reviewed paper on the Xinjiang Police Files for the Journal of the European Association for Chinese Studies and he has placed the full set of detainee images and some of the other evidence online.

"The material is unredacted, it's raw, it's unmitigated, it's diverse. We have everything," he told the BBC.

"We have confidential documents. We have speech transcripts where leaders freely talk about what they really think. We have spreadsheets. We have images. It's completely unprecedented and it blows apart the Chinese propaganda veneer."

The Xinjiang Police Files contain another set of documents that go even further than the detainee photographs in exposing the prison-like nature of the re-education camps that China insists are "vocational schools".

A set of internal police protocols describes the routine use of armed officers in all areas of the camps, the positioning of machine guns and sniper rifles in the watchtowers, and the existence of a shoot-to-kill policy for those trying to escape.

Blindfolds, handcuffs and shackles are mandatory for any "student" being transferred between facilities or even to

hospital.

or decades, Xinjiang has seen a cycle of simmering separatism, sporadic violence and tightening government control.

But in 2013 and 2014, two deadly attacks targeting pedestrians and commuters in Beijing and the southern Chinese city of Kunming - blamed by the government on Uyghur separatists and radical Islamists - prompted a dramatic shift in policy.

The state began to see Uyghur culture itself as the problem and, within a few years, hundreds of giant re-education camps began to appear on satellite photos, to which Uyghurs were sent without trial.

Xinjiang's formal prison system has also been massively expanded as another method for controlling Uyghur identity - particularly in the face of mounting international criticism over the lack of legal process in the camps.

It is in a set of 452 spreadsheets that this dual approach is most starkly exposed, complete with the names, addresses and ID numbers of more than a quarter of a million Uyghurs - showing which of them has been detained, in which type of facility and why.

They paint a picture of relentless internment in both camps and prisons, with row upon row documenting the prejudicial prying of Chinese officials sent deep into Uyghur society - backed with big data surveillance tools - to arbitrarily detain at will.

There are countless examples of people being punished retrospectively for "crimes" that took place years or even decades ago - with one man jailed for 10 years in 2017 for having "studied Islamic scripture with his grandmother" for a few days in 2010.

Many hundreds are shown to have been targeted for their mobile phone use - mostly for listening to "illegal lectures" or having encrypted apps installed.

Others are punished with up to a decade in prison for not using their devices enough, with well over a hundred instances of “phone has run out of credit” being listed as a sign that the user is trying to evade the constant digital surveillance.

The spreadsheets show how lives are sifted in search of the slightest of pretexts, which are turned into the broadest of charges - “picking quarrels” or “disturbing the social order” - and then punished as serious acts of terrorism; seven years, 10 years, 25 years, the columns of sentences stretch on and on.

If the terrorism label is ever justly applied, it’s impossible to discern among a sea of data pointing to the internment of a people not for what they’ve done, but for who they are.

Tursun Kadir’s spreadsheet entry lists some preaching and studying of Islamic scripture dating back to the 1980s and then, in more recent years, the offence of “growing a beard under the influence of religious extremism”.

For this, the 58 year old was jailed for 16 years and 11 months. Photographs in the cache show him both before and after the Chinese state determined his expression of Uyghur identity to be illegal.

Even for those not in a camp or prison, the Xinjiang Police Files reveal the gruelling impact of such high levels of scrutiny and surveillance.

The images show that Uyghurs still living in their homes were summoned in large numbers to be photographed, with the associated image timestamps showing whole communities - from the very elderly to families with young children - called into police stations at all hours, including in the middle of the night.

A similar file-naming system as that used for the photos taken in the camps and prisons suggests a possible common purpose - a huge facial recognition database that China

was building at the time.

It’s hard to tell whether their faces betray the knowledge of the camps, into which many thousands were already disappearing, but the accompanying spreadsheets make the danger all too clear.

Five months after their police photos were taken in 2018, husband and wife Tursun Memetimin and Ashigul Turghun were sent to a detention centre after being accused of having “listened to a recording of an illegal lecture” on someone else’s mobile phone six years earlier.

Two of their three daughters’ photographs are also in the hacked files - Ruzigul Turghun, who was 10 at the time of their parents’ disappearance - and Ayshem Turghun, who was six.



The spreadsheets give few details about the fate of such children whose parents have both been detained.

It’s likely a significant number have been placed into the permanent, long-term care of a system of state-run boarding schools built across Xinjiang at the same time as the camps.

In fact, the closely shaved hair visible in so many of the images of children is a sign, overseas Uyghurs have told the BBC, that many are already made to attend such schools at least during weekdays, even if still under the care of one or both parents.

The photographs give human form to

a policy designed to deliberately target Uyghur families as a repository of identity and culture and - in China's own words - to "break their roots, break their lineage, break their connections, break their origins".

As well as exposing the inner workings of China's system of incarceration more clearly than ever before, the Xinjiang Police Files provide fresh clues about its scale.

Most of the spreadsheets relate to a county in southern Xinjiang, known as Konasheher in Uyghur, or Shufu in Chinese.

An analysis of the data by Dr Zenz shows that in just this one county, a total of 22,762 residents - more than 12% of the adult population - were in either a camp or a prison in the years 2017 and 2018.

If applied to Xinjiang as a whole, that figure would mean the detention of more than 1.2 million Uyghur and other Turkic minority adults - well within the broad range of estimates made by Xinjiang experts, which China has always dismissed.

working with a consortium of 14 media organisations from 11 countries, the BBC has been able to authenticate significant elements of the Xinjiang Police Files.

Uyghurs living in Europe and the US were asked for the names and ID numbers of their missing relatives back home in Xinjiang. Multiple matches in the spreadsheet data were discovered, providing firm evidence that the information contains real people.

The BBC also asked Professor Hany Farid, an image-forensics expert at the University of California at Berkeley, to examine a subset of the photographs of Uyghur detainees.

He found no evidence that the images had been fabricated, with none of the usual tell-tale signs found in computer synthesised "deep fakes" nor any other indication of malicious, digital manipulation.

A strange effect visible on the edges of some of the images - as if they've been copied and then rotated slightly - can be explained in a way that also lends weight to the idea that they form part of China's huge surveillance network in Xinjiang.

The glitches, Prof Farid believes, are likely to be the result of a commonly-used standardisation process for facial recognition databases, where any portraits that are slightly offset are automatically rotated to align the eyes with the horizontal.

"This is, of course, a completely innocuous manipulation," he concluded in a written report for the BBC.

Further authentication can be provided by arranging the images in order of their accompanying timestamps and then observing the common details visible in the background, which show them to have been taken in real time and in real places.

After approaching the Chinese government for comment about the hacked data, with detailed questions about the evidence it contains, the media consortium received a written response from the Chinese Embassy in Washington DC.

"Xinjiang related issues are in essence about countering violent terrorism, radicalisation and separatism, not about human rights or religion," the statement said, adding that the Chinese authorities had taken "a host of decisive, robust and effective deradicalisation measures".

"The region now enjoys social stability and harmony as well as economic development," it went on, saying that these things offer "the most powerful response to all sorts of lies and disinformation on Xinjiang".

But there was no response to any of the specific evidence in the cache.

The Xinjiang Police Files contain another



set of unique photographs that appear to only further highlight the extreme levels of physical control that Uyghurs are subjected to in the attempt to forcibly reengineer their identity.

The hacked files contain a number of speeches from high-ranking Party officials that allow an insight into the mindset behind the policies, as well as some of the clearest evidence so far for where responsibility ultimately lies.

In a speech, stamped as “classified” and delivered by Zhao Kezhi, China’s Minister for Public Security, on a visit to Xinjiang in June 2018, he suggests that at least two million people are infected with “extremist thought” in southern Xinjiang alone.

Peppered with references to President Xi Jinping, the speech heaps praise on the Chinese leader for his “important instructions” for the construction of new facilities and an increase in funding for

prisons to cope with the influx in detainees necessary to reach that two million target.

And if the mass internment of Xinjiang’s Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities really does flow from orders given by the Chinese leader, then there are hints too about the kind of timeframe he has in mind.

The cache contains another secret speech, delivered in 2017 by Chen Quanguo - until recently Xinjiang’s hardline Communist Party secretary.

“For some, even five years re-education may not be enough,” he tells his audience of senior military and police cadres, a seeming admission that for as long as any Uyghur continues to feel a loyalty to identity or faith at least as strong as to the Party, there’s no end in sight.

“Once they are let out, problems will reappear, that is the reality in Xinjiang,” he says.

The Bachelet Visit: A Disappointed Uyghur's View

By Kok Bayraq, Bitter Winter, 2022-05-27

On May 25, the UN news office reported that UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet held a “valuable” meeting with China’s president Xi Jinping, but still no valuable words were seen in related tweets of Bachelet’s office.

Two days before, Ms. Bachelet had announced that her visit to China would not be an investigation. It was a remarkable show of sincerity, acknowledging a surrender. But it was too late.

Why didn’t she mention this on March, when she get permission to visit China, or at least 28 days before, when her advance team arrived in China? Why did she give a false signal to the world, including to oppressed people, by repeatedly anticipating an unfettered and meaningful investigation before making a U-turn to a “no investigation” point?

I find it highly irresponsible. Ms. Bachelet acknowledged her own weakness and declared her unwillingness to investigate after the trip was in motion. Many Uyghurs abroad issued statements and attended rallies with the expectation of obtaining information about their missing relatives. She should know what the cost of these actions would be to their relatives in the camps and jails.

According to reports, Ms. Bachelet has been negotiating with Beijing since September 2018 for a visit to “Xinjiang,” requesting the opportunity to conduct an unfettered and meaningful investigation. She was given permission in March of this year to conduct

her investigation. After her March statement, Chinese officials emphasized that the visit should be a “friendly” exchange of views, not an investigation. It seems that her office accepted China’s disguised ultimatum.

That is why, to date, the course of Ms. Bachelet’s visit has been kept secret from the international community. This approach does not follow the true mission and working principles of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Ms. Bachelet is not meeting with representatives of the affected parties, including Uyghur activists, camp witnesses, and human rights organizations and experts who are concerned about the situation in the region.

The OHCHR has not released a report despite calls from international organizations. What is the OHCHR waiting for? Are they waiting for China to finish hosting their visitors, just as they allowed China to finish hosting the Beijing Winter Olympics, complete the Belt and Road Plan, and even continue the Uyghur genocide?

According to Bloomberg, Ms. Bachelet’s claim that there will be “no investigation” is an attempt to manage expectations of her landmark visit to China.

The documents Ms. Bachelet has been hiding for a year should have already proven that what is going on in the Uyghur region is far beyond a human rights “problem”; it is genocide. The Uyghur situation has been declared a genocide by eight Western



countries, and more than 30 countries have condemned China's Uyghur policy in UN meetings.

The Uyghur Tribunal in the UK has already issued a judgment of genocide after spending more than a year working with more than a dozen independent judges, 30 experts, and 200 witnesses, which included a review of reports issued by international experts and their organizations before and after the tribunal. Ms. Bachelet is supposed to know how many relatives living abroad are eager to obtain information about the victims and how many of their relatives in the Uyghur region have already been interrogated, harassed, and even taken to black cells for the statements they made and the activities in which they participated abroad.

However, if the visit is not to conduct an investigation, why is Ms. Bachelet going? For tourism? A wedding, perhaps? Just few days before, Ms. Liz Throssell, OHCHR's spokeswoman had said the visit would be focused on Xinjiang. To that, we must ask, if there will be no "investigation," why? To give advice or get a lesson from Chinese authorities on how to commit genocide?

"She [Ms. Bachelet] will be meeting high-level government officials," the spokeswoman

said. To discuss what, exactly?

To those who were watching, spokeswoman Throssell's May 17 statement smelled of surrender: "The purpose of [the] visit is really ... a dialogue with the Chinese government, with the Chinese authorities on a range of domestic, regional, and global human rights issues," the statement read.

In any investigation, a dialogue is not a goal; it is a means. The dialogue gains importance with what is being said and what is being asked.

The brief seven-day visit that is planned and the plethora of general topics mentioned in the statement make it clear that this visit is a formality rather than a sincere attempt to solve an issue.

A series of statements issued since March of this year about the visit and the hidden agenda indicate that the original vital objective of the investigation was abandoned. These actions prove that the OHCHR has agreed to close their eyes and will not discuss the genocide during Ms. Bachelet's visit, forcing her to acknowledge her weakness.

How can Ms. Bachelet ignore the crying and pleading of the victims of this genocide and ignore the calls of more than 200 organizations? Why can't she conduct an independent investigation? Is there something we are not told?

The world clearly knows that China is strong, stubborn, and evil. It is committing genocide, and an investigation is needed. If an official is not strong enough to insist that dictators who commit genocide must be stopped, perhaps she should not chair the OHCHR. And she should not just "tour" a place where genocide is occurring either.

China's Propaganda Ranks Highly on Google, Youtube Searches: Study

By Theo Wayt, New York Post, 2022-05-27



Google and YouTube often give Chinese state propaganda outlets high rankings in searches on hot-button political issues — including denials of the abuse of Muslims in Xinjiang and conspiracy theories that the coronavirus originated in a US military lab, according to a new study.

Chinese state sources also rank highly on Microsoft Bing searches about controversial issues, according to the report published Friday by the Brookings Institute and the Alliance for Securing Democracy.

“China has exploited search engine results on Xinjiang and COVID-19, two subjects that are geopolitically salient to Beijing,” the researchers said.

News searches on Google and Bing for “Xinjiang” — the Chinese region where China has locked up an estimated more than one million Uyghurs and other Muslims in what critics say amounts to a genocide — have included a Chinese state-backed source within the top 10 results in 88% of searches, according to the study.

On YouTube, a whopping 98% of Xinjiang searches showed a Chinese government-backed video in the top 10 results, the study said. The researchers conducted the study by searching the terms over a 120-day period.

“Google actively works to combat coordinated influence and censorship operations while also protecting access to

information and free expression online,” a Google spokesperson said in a statement to The Post. “Third party research shows that Google Search consistently returns high quality results, especially compared to other search engines.”

In addition to denying abusing Muslims in Xinjiang, Chinese state media outlets have also aggressively pushed unfounded theories that the coronavirus pandemic originated in a US military lab. Many of these center around a base in Maryland called Fort Detrick that previously hosted the US’ biological weapons program.

In searches for “Fort Detrick” on YouTube, an average of five Chinese state-sponsored

videos showed up within the top 10 results, the researchers said. News searches for “Unit 731,” another term related to the theory that the coronavirus leaked from a US lab, are also reportedly full of Chinese state-sponsored results.

Google said that it gives users disclaimers on YouTube with context about sources of information, including telling users when media outlets are sponsored by governments.

While the researchers didn’t examine search results related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, they argued that the online reach of Chinese state sources is troubling because they are “channeling Kremlin talking points to audiences around the world.”

16% of top search data collected over 120 days returned Chinese state media content

Search engine	Total observations	Chinese state media observations	Not Chinese state media observations	Percentage Chinese state media
Bing News	12,477	2,260	10,217	18%
Google News	14,310	3,525	10,785	25%
Bing Search	15,840	762	15,078	5%
Google Search	13,255	1,076	12,179	8%
YouTube	14,160	3,568	10,592	25%
TOTAL	70,042	11,191	58,851	16%



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