

Rights Groups Urge Thailand Not to Force Captive Uyghurs Back to China

By Voice of America, 2022-06-29

Rights groups are urging Thailand not to send any of some 50 Uyghurs it has been holding captive for the past eight years back to China, fearing a repeat of 2015, when the government forcibly returned more than 100 Uyghurs to China.

Thailand is believed to be holding more than 50 Uyghurs in immigration detention centers across the country, most of them since at least 2014.

The United States and others have accused Beijing of genocide over its treatment of the

predominantly Muslim minority group living in northwest China's Xinjiang region, and urged countries that Uyghurs have fled to for safety not to force them back.

Beijing denies persecuting the group.

In Thailand, more than a dozen rights groups, led by the People's Empowerment Foundation, handed the Foreign Affairs Committee of parliament's lower house a petition on June 15 asking for its help to spare the detained Uyghurs a forced return.

"The first thing is to guarantee [the] safety of



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them in Thailand. They must be not sent back to China. That is the most important message that we send to the MPs,” foundation chair Chalida Tajaroensuk told VOA last week.

She said the groups were spurred to action after hearing from sympathetic but confidential sources within the Thai government late last year that Beijing may be stepping up its efforts to retrieve the Uyghurs.

Neither China’s Foreign Affairs Ministry in Beijing nor its embassy in Bangkok replied to VOA’s repeated requests for comment.

“Human Rights Watch has over the years documented overwhelming evidence showing serious abuses of ethnic Uyghurs by Chinese authorities, including arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, torture and other repression,” said Sunai Phasuk, senior Thailand researcher for the U.S.-based rights group, which also backs the petition.

“In effect, Chinese authorities have turned Xinjiang ... into a detention camp,” he said.

‘No clear assurance’

Like Chalida, Sunai fears a repeat of 2015, especially once China starts to lift COVID-linked entry restrictions.

“There has been no clear assurance that they will not repeat this again, so the danger [for] Uyghurs who remain in Thailand can be considered as still imminent,” he said.

Chalida said most of the Uyghurs being held in Thailand were among the hundreds arrested in 2014 for entering the country illegally, after fleeing China in hopes of settling safely elsewhere. Many Uyghurs aim for Turkey, where they claim kinship with the Turkic majority, other Muslim-majority countries, or the West.

Thailand deported 173 of the Uyghurs, mostly women and children, to Turkey in July 2015. A week later, it deported another



109, mostly men, back to China, setting off a wave of condemnation at home and abroad. In Turkey, irate locals stormed the Thai consulate, smashing windows and pulling down the Thai flag.

At the time, Thai authorities said 50 Uyghurs were still left in Thailand to have their country of citizenship verified. No Uyghur deportations have been reported since.

Neither Thailand's Foreign Affairs Ministry nor the national police force's Immigration Bureau, which runs the detention centers holding the Uyghurs, would tell VOA how many were in the centers now.

Chalida said her sources in the government and detention centers put the number at about 56.

Opposition lawmaker Rangsiman Rome, who accepted the July 15 petition as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, confirmed the figure. He told VOA it came to him from a government official who briefed the lower house's Legal Affairs, Justice and Human Rights Committee, which he also serves on, a few months ago.

He said he would try to leverage his committee posts and seat in parliament to press the government on what, if any, plans it has to get the Uyghurs out of limbo, and to make sure it never sends them back to China.

"I strongly believe that if [the] Thai government sends them back to China, it's like we send them to death," he said.

'Not humane'

Immigration Bureau spokesman Achayon

Kraithong said the government had no plans to send them anywhere for now. Those decisions were up to other agencies, he added, mainly the National Security Council and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The National Security Council did not reply to VOA's requests for comment.

At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, spokesman Tanee Sangrat said Thailand "will continue to take care of them until a practical and viable solution for the group can be found."

He would not say whether Thailand had ruled out forcing them back to China, or why it hasn't let them leave for other countries.

Panitan Wattanayagorn, who chairs Prime Minister Prayut Chan-ocha's Security Advisory Committee, said Thailand was stuck between the competing wishes of the Uyghurs and China.

"Some of them [the Uyghurs] would like to go ... to different countries in Europe, to the United States. Some of them want to go to Turkey, to Indonesia and other [countries]. And China wants all of them to be returned. This is why this has stalled," he told VOA.

Panitan said his team prepared a list of recommendations for solving the impasse about two years ago. He would not discuss the details.

"But in general, we recommended, based on [the] prime minister's and deputy prime minister's initiatives, to follow the international practices of repatriation [of] people to the destination without sending them to harm's way," he said, while

weighing relevant laws, national security and “humanitarian issues.”

Until the government does decide where to send the Uyghurs, Chalida said it should at least let them out of the detention centers, where her sources tell her some are suffering both physical and mental health problems from the conditions. The Foreign Affairs Ministry says authorities are making regular

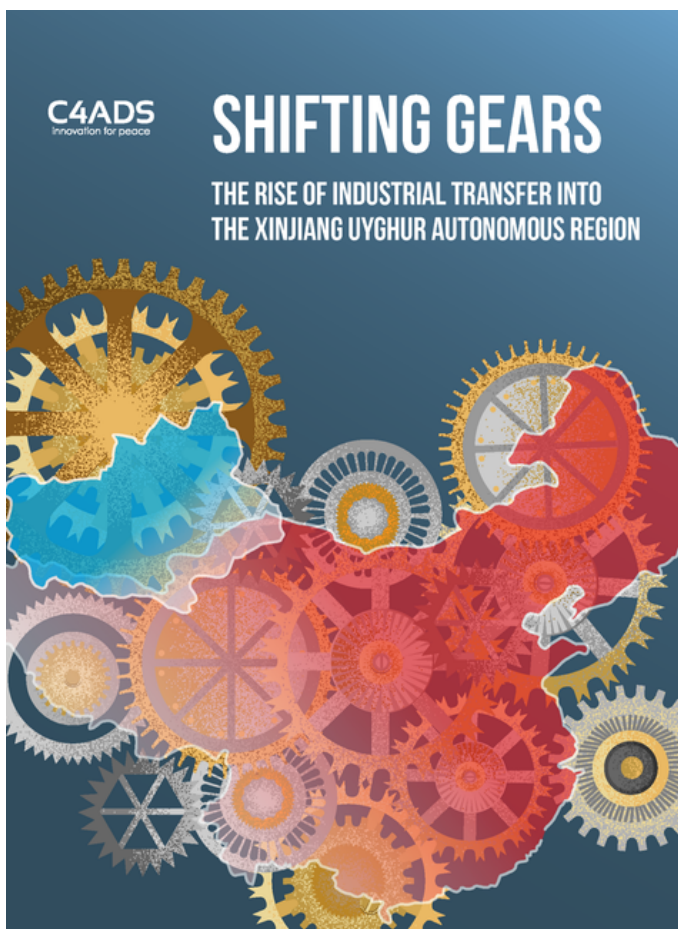
improvements to the centers to care for mind and body alike.

Even so, Panitan, speaking only for himself, said Thailand should settle their fate as soon as possible.

“Personally, I think we should end this issue one way or the other,” he said, “This is not humane to treat these people this way.”

Report Alleges Global Companies ‘Unknowingly’ Support China’s Use of Uyghur Forced Labor

By Asim Kashgarian, Voice of America, 2022-06-30



Some global companies could be «unknowingly supporting» China’s use of Uyghur forced labor from the Xinjiang region by importing goods from Chinese companies headquartered in other parts of China, according to a new report.

Shifting Gears: The Rise of Industrial Transfer into the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, published Thursday by the Washington-based nonprofit Center for Advanced Defense Studies (C4ADS), says a new U.S. law banning the import of goods produced by Uyghur forced labor in China includes loopholes that allow some products to enter global supply chains.

On June 21, the U.S. government began enforcing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA), a law meant to ensure goods made «wholly or in part with forced labor»

in Xinjiang do not enter the U.S. market.

But enforcement is complicated by a Chinese policy that encourages companies located elsewhere in the country to open operations or manufacturing centers in Xinjiang. The so-called Xinjiang Pairing Assistance Program incentivizes companies to move their manufacturing operations into the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), according to Nicole Morgret, human security analyst at C4ADS and the author of the report.

«This means that many companies in XUAR are linked to eastern China, whether as subsidiaries of a conglomerate or through investment and corporate officer overlap,» Morgret told VOA.

According to Morgret, global corporations doing business with Chinese companies that have corporate or manufacturing ties to Xinjiang risk «unknowingly» supporting forced labor.

«[Chinese] manufacturing corporations in the Uyghur region closely collaborate with the local government entities carrying out repression,» Morgret said. «As such, global stakeholders will have to improve their due diligence practices to better assess the domestic Chinese corporate networks to identify ties to forced labor in XUAR.»

These corporate connections are purposefully obscured and can be hard to track, meaning businesses that source from companies headquartered in other Chinese cities may unknowingly be importing goods produced by forced labor in Xinjiang, according to the

report.

Global brands under scrutiny

Tesco, a British grocery and general merchandise chain, and Esprit, a Hong Kong- and Germany-based clothing manufacturer, may be «inadvertently» buying and selling products tainted by Uyghur forced labor, the report stated.

«According to our analysis, Esprit and Tesco source products from Xinxiang Chemical Fibre, a major chemical fiber manufacturer and state-owned conglomerate based in Xinxiang, Henan,» Morgret said. «Xinxiang Chemical Fibre has two subsidiaries based in the Uyghur region, which means there is a significant risk that it relies on forced labor in its manufacturing process.»

According to a Tesco spokesperson, the company takes «allegations of human rights abuses» in its supply chain extremely seriously and conducts regular and thorough checks to ensure workers are treated fairly.

«We have not made any orders connected to this site for more than 12 months and have removed it from our approved list of sources,» said the spokesperson, who declined to be named in accordance with company policy and who communicated via email.

Esprit did not respond to VOA's multiple inquiries.

While the U.S. government is easily able to identify and block goods imported directly from Xinjiang, it is much harder for relevant agencies to identify goods from Xinjiang that



are transshipped through eastern China or third countries, according to Morgret.

«The U.S. government needs to develop better methods to map complex supply chains and can benefit from using methodologies showcased in our report,» Morgret said.

President Joe Biden signed UFLPA into law in December after it passed with majority bipartisan support in Congress. Biden accused Beijing of «widespread state-sponsored forced labor» of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other Muslim ethnic minorities in Xinjiang.

The U.S. government has accused Beijing of rights abuses including genocide and crimes against humanity against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang. U.S. officials estimate that since at least 2017, China has detained more than 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups in Xinjiang, subjecting detained individuals to forced labor, forced sterilization, torture,

separation of children from parents and near-constant surveillance.

China's response

Beijing dismisses the U.S. accusations as lies, insisting that the country's policies in the Xinjiang region are aimed at combating what it calls the «three evil forces» of separatism, terrorism and extremism.

According to Liu Pengyu, spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Washington, the «allegations of «forced labor» in Xinjiang are nothing but vicious lies concocted» by anti-China forces.

«We admonish the U.S. to correct the mistake immediately, and stop using Xinjiang-related issues to spread lies, interfere in China's internal affairs and contain China's development,» Liu told VOA in an email. «China will take necessary measures to safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of Chinese enterprises and workers.»

History of Uyghur forced labor

In the past five years, China has established «a massive state-sponsored system of forced labor» in the Xinjiang region, according to a report published two weeks ago by Sheffield Hallam University.

«Uyghur and other minoritized workers from the region are unable to refuse or voluntarily exit jobs assigned to them by the government,» said the report, Built on Repression.

The report said the Chinese government's «labor transfers and surplus labor employment transfers» programs in Xinjiang meet the standards of forced labor under international law.

Goods made by forced labor

According to Laura Murphy, professor of

human rights and contemporary slavery at Sheffield Hallam University and one of the authors of Built on Repression, the U.S. government has identified products with tomatoes, cotton and polysilicon, a key raw material in solar panels, as being at particularly high risk for being made with Uyghur forced labor.

Products tainted with Uyghur forced labor also include «apparel and shoes made of all fabrics, all new energy technologies, extractive industries such as coal, copper, and rare earth materials, electronics, building materials and machinery,» Murphy told VOA. «And the government has now told companies it is their responsibility to ensure that they are not bringing those forced-labor-made goods into the homes of consumers in the U.S.»

A 33-Year-Old Female Fights 'Old Boys' Club' in Japan Election

By Yuko Takeo and Shoko Oda, Bloomberg, 2022-06-27

Thirty-three, female and of Uyghur descent, one candidate in Japan's parliamentary elections is seeking to break down the barriers to the "old boys' club" of the nation's politics.

Arfiya Eri said it's time for Japan to embrace the changes unfolding around it and she's making her bid as the youngest candidate in the July 10 upper house election backed by the Liberal Democratic Party -- the long-ruling conservative group that critics say has

dragged its feet in advancing the rights of women.

"Japan already is a diverse country, it's just we're not seeing that represented in politics," said Eri, speaking in an interview with Bloomberg TV Monday. "It's something that I'd like to bring forward with my own candidacy as well."

In one of the world's most homogeneous countries, Eri -- who speaks seven languages



-- stands out. If she wins, she'd join a tiny number of naturalized Japanese lawmakers and probably be 20 years younger than most members.

Born in Fukuoka, southern Japan, with Uyghur heritage on her father's side and Uzbek heritage on her mother's, Eri gained Japanese nationality as a child. She moved to Shanghai at the age of 10 for her father's work and, after attending American schools in China, graduated from Georgetown University in Washington and its graduate school.

That upbringing and academic background helped shaped her world view, especially when it comes to China, which has been accused by the US of genocide of its Uyghur

minority. China has consistently denied allegations that it oppresses the majority Muslim Uyghurs, dubbing such claims "the lie of the century."

"I've seen an undemocratic world, and I've experienced it in a very significant way," said Eri. "I understand deeply at my core what happens when we give up our democracy, when we don't protect our democracy."

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and his LDP have pushed back against a more assertive China, while treading delicately with a country that's Japan's largest trading partner. Spooked by Russia's attack on Ukraine, the once-dovish Kishida has promised a substantial increase in military spending from a customary limit of about 1% of gross

domestic product, a break with tradition for a nation with a pacifist constitution.

Despite such noticeable changes on the international front, at home LDP governments have made little progress in narrowing a political empowerment gender gap that ranked 147 out of 155 countries in the latest rankings from the World Economic Forum.

While the percentage of female candidates entering the upcoming vote is the highest on record at about 30%, the LDP had one of the lowest percentage of female candidates among the parties at 23%, according to the Tokyo Shimbun newspaper. About half the candidates for the largest opposition group, the Constitutional Democratic Party, are women.

“We believe that by getting female candidates to win, Japanese politics will really change,” the group’s Secretary General Chinami Nishimura said at a news conference this month.

The difficulties women face in reaching the top in the LDP partly reflects their scarcity at all party levels. Only 10% of the total members of the Diet’s powerful lower house are women, with the LDP at 8%. Japan ranks 162nd among the 193 countries surveyed by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in terms of gender balance -- below Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

“We are still an old boys’ club,” said Eri. “But we recognize that it’s an old boys’ club. That’s a start.”

Eri, who has also worked at the Bank of Japan, says she decided to run for the LDP because she believes the ruling party is the only one equipped to protect national security and govern Japan through multiple crises including Covid-19.

As a candidate for the national, proportional representation segment of the election, Eri is vying for votes from across the country. Her rivals include former ministers and those with industry backing, but her fate will depend on how many votes both the ruling party and she personally wins. Recent national elections have tended to show historically low voter turnout.

About 36% of respondents to a Yomiuri newspaper poll published last week said they intend to vote for the LDP, which has relied on a base of older voters in rural constituencies, in the proportional representation section, with all other parties at 10% or lower.

“We need better representation -- we need young people to feel that they are being represented, that the future is in their hands,” said Eri. “Right now, a lot of antagonism comes from the fact that most of the politicians look the same to them.”



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