

China hits back as it faces growing criticism of its human rights record, treatment of Uyghurs

By Sean Mantesso, 1

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It's not unusual for sparks to fly when foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian takes to the podium for China's daily foreign ministry press conference.

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Last week, a report handed down by the Biden administration, which included China on a list of nations accused of human rights abuses, provoked an attack dotted with language that sounded like it could be out of former United States president Donald Trump's playbook.

Mr Zhao said the accusation that China was committing atrocities against ethnic Uyghurs in Xinjiang was “the biggest lie of the century”, labelling the report “nothing more than a piece of waste paper”.

Instead, he said, when it came to genocide and crimes against humanity, “the ‘hat’ is a perfect fit for the United States”.

“[America] should not forget the African Americans who died in the Tulsa massacre 100



China says the claim of atrocities against Uyghurs is “the biggest lie of the century”. (Reuters: Lucy Nicholson)

years ago, the Indians who were expelled and slaughtered during the Westward movement, and the cries of people like George Floyd.”

Similar criticisms have become increasingly common and it's tirades like these that have cemented Mr Zhao's reputation as one of Beijing's most effective “wolf warriors”.

Last weekend, China's mission to the United Nations delivered a furious attack against Australia's human rights record too.

As pressure mounts on China over accusations of widespread human rights abuses in Xinjiang, arbitrary detention of dissidents and the erosion of freedoms in Hong Kong, Beijing is hitting back.

Human rights experts warn Beijing is mounting a sophisticated campaign to both deflect scrutiny away from China's government, and upend established norms and definitions around human rights.

Human Rights Watch China director Sophie Richardson says, "Beijing is seeking to neutralise UN human rights mechanisms", while also trying to highlight the human rights failures of its rivals, through its diplomats and its media.

'People in the US want human rights more than they want life'

In February this year, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi became the first Chinese official to address the UN's Human Rights Council.

Much of the speech was devoted to defending China's record in Xinjiang and Hong Kong.

But it also gave us a glimpse of how Beijing views — and how it wants the world to view — human rights.

"Socialism with Chinese characteristics ... [has] found the path of human rights development that suits China's national conditions and needs," he said.

"[Nations] must promote and protect human rights in light of their national realities and the needs of their people."

Yun Jiang, managing editor of *China in the World* at the Australian National University (ANU), said the CCP hailed its economic success "as evidence for China's human rights achievements".

"In their view, ignoring some individual rights is necessary in order to ensure collective rights," she said.

It differs from the view that some rights are universal, and Ms Jiang said "some of the human rights framing that the CCP has been doing is quite widely accepted in China".

She said some in China have commented that "people in the US want human rights more than life", after widespread resistance to COVID-19 lockdown measures in the name of freedom.

But for those who don't agree, there is no room for debate, she said.

"From their own perspective, only the CCP can ensure the human rights for people in China, and



Lijian Zhao 赵立坚 @zlj517
China government official



On July 12, Canada found 160+ undocumented&unmarked graves at the site of a former residential school. This is the 4th discovery of this kind since May 2021. We wonder how many skeletons are there in the closet of Canada?



2:49 PM · Jul 15, 2021



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only the CCP can speak for people in China," Ms Jiang said.

Alarming for international observers, China is seeking to rewrite procedures at the UN that would not only shield Beijing from criticism on human rights, but all governments.

'Systematically trying to undermine and weaken' human rights institutions

Ted Piccone, chief engagement officer at the World Justice Project, has paid close attention to China's rising role in the international human rights arena.

"In the last five to seven years, we're seeing a much different China under Xi Jinping ... China has gone on the offence, most particularly in the human rights system," he said.

Since 2018 when China became a member of the UN Human Rights Council, their diplomats have pursued resoluti-

ons that are “systematically trying to undermine and weaken” the organisation, he said. “[The resolutions] take what has been largely a process of calling nations out on their violations into something that they call ‘mutually beneficial cooperation’, which is a term that really means only states can criticise each other,” Mr Piccone said.

He said China wants to make human rights a bilateral issue, one that is dealt with between nations, rather than subject to independent and broad international scrutiny.

“It should all be done behind doors — diplomacy. That’s China’s preference for how to do human rights.”

And they’re finding willing partners to support its resolutions.

The UN Human Rights Council includes Syria, Venezuela and Russia as current member states alongside China — all of whom are accused of gross human rights violations.

“[These countries] like the idea of sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, most nation-states do,” Mr Piccone said.

‘A cold day in hell’ before Beijing would accept scrutiny

Chinese state media has been on the offensive to highlight human rights failures in the West too.

Over the course of three days in late May through to early June, China’s English-language broadcaster CGTN published more than a dozen stories about the 100-year anniversary of the Tulsa massacre in the US.

Notably, it published nothing on or around June 4 about the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing.

Meanwhile, state-run tabloid the Global Times has been equally vocal, publishing dozens of stories and graphics highlighting historical and contemporary human rights failures in the US, Australia, the UK and Canada



Under Xi Jinping, China has gone on the offensive over human rights. (AP: Andy Wong)



China became a member of the UN Human Rights Council in 2018. (Reuters: Thomas Peter)

this year alone.

Ms Richardson said scrutiny of human rights in any country was welcome, but it would be a “cold day in hell before Beijing is willing to accept” a similar level of scrutiny over its own alleged abuses.

Despite repeated attempts at establishing an independent investigation, the UN has failed to gain full access to Xinjiang to assess claims of human rights abuses against ethnic minorities.

“China so far has succeeded in blocking any serious independent scrutiny of what’s going on there, and the situation is getting worse,” Mr Piccone said.

Meanwhile, China’s mission to the UN has attacked America’s record on race relations in recent times and called for an international investigation.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken last week welcomed further scrutiny and announced a formal invitation for UN investigators.

And last month China’s representative on the UN Human Rights Council urged an investigation into Canada’s historic treatment of Indigenous people.

Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau responded.

“Where is China’s truth and reconciliation commission? Where is the openness that Canada has always shown and the responsibility that Canada has taken for the terrible mistakes of the past?”

‘We can’t afford to alienate them’

With more economic and military clout than ever before, China is applying pressure to other nations to conform to its human rights agenda.

When Ukraine was poised to join more than 40 other countries in a joint statement condemning China’s treatment of ethnic Uyghurs earlier this month, Beijing intervened.

“The Chinese government made very clear that if Ukraine went ahead and joined that kind of initiative, it could not expect to get Chinese made vaccines [that had been offered],” Ms Richardson said.

Ukraine subsequently withdrew — and



The UN has failed to gain full access to East Turkistan to assess claims of human rights abuses against ethnic minorities. (Reuters: Ben Blanchard)



Secretary Antony Blinken @SecBlinken
United States government official



Responsible nations must not shrink from scrutiny of their human rights record. Rather, they should be transparent with the intent to grow and do better. That is why I'm announcing a formal invitation for @UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism to visit the U.S.

4:35 AM · Jul 14, 2021



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days later signed a new investment deal with China. More broadly, Ms Richardson said Chinese development projects were also being tied to support on human rights.

“I can tell you this — very few of the governments that we talked to ... believe the Chinese government’s narrative about how it is treating Uyghurs,” she said.

“But they will also say to us ‘we need that aid package, we need that trade deal, we need those vaccines, we need the BRI [Belt and Road Initiative] investment, and we literally just can’t afford to alienate them’.”

Mr Piccone said human rights had always been politicised, and despite their flaws, that’s what makes bodies like the UN Human Rights Council so impor-

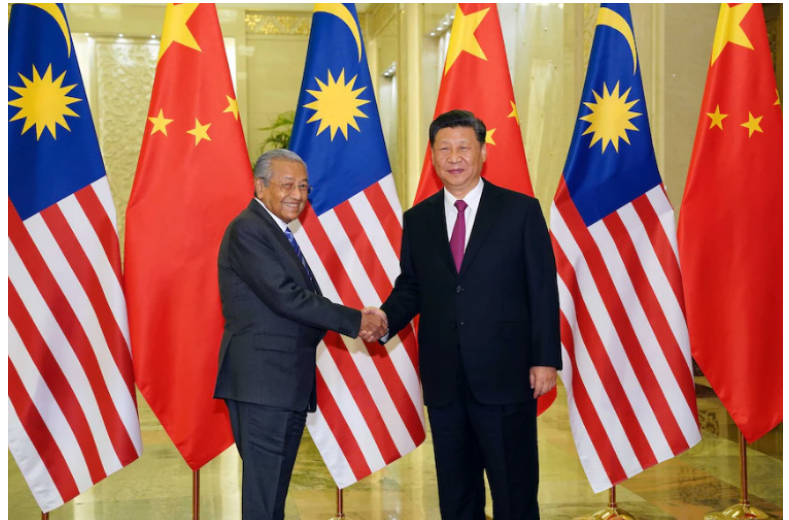
tant.

“They have value from the point of view of reminding states what those obligations are, interpreting them, applying them to real-world situations,” he said.

“The most important thing is to counter this idea that there’s such a thing as ‘human rights with Chinese characteristics’.”

Human rights, Mr Piccone added, are universal.

The ABC approached China’s UN mission and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs for comment.



Human Rights Watch says Chinese development projects are being tied to support on human rights. (AP: Andrea Verdelli/Pool Photo)

Room for 10,000: Inside China’s largest detention centre

AP, Dabancheng, JUL 22 2021

“The detention centre is the largest in the country and possibly the world, with a complex that sprawls over 220 acres — making it twice as large as Vatican City

The Uyghur inmates sat in uniform rows with their legs crossed in lotus position and their backs ramrod straight, numbered and tagged, gazing at a television playing grainy black-and-white images of Chinese Communist Party history.

This is one of an estimated 240 cells in

just one section of Urumqi No. 3 Detention Centre in Dabancheng, seen by Associated Press journalists granted extraordinary access during a state-led tour to China’s far west Xinjiang region.

The detention centre is the largest in the country and possibly the world, with a complex that sprawls over 220 acres — making it twice as large as Vatican City. A sign at the front identified it as a “kanshousuo,” a pre-trial detention facility.

Chinese officials declined to say how many inmates were there, saying the number varied. But the AP estimated the centre could hold roughly 10,000 people and many more if crowded, based on satellite imagery and the cells and benches seen during the tour. While the BBC and Reuters have in the past reported from the outside, the AP was the first Western media organization allowed in.

This site suggests that China still holds and plans to hold vast numbers of Uighurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in detention. Satellite imagery shows that new buildings stretching almost a mile long were added to the Dabancheng detention facility in 2019.

China at first denied their existence, and then, under heavy international criticism, said in 2019 that all the occupants had “graduated.”

But the AP’s visit to Dabancheng, satellite imagery and interviews with experts and former detainees suggest that while many “training centres” were indeed closed, some like this one were simply converted into prisons or pre-trial detention facilities.

Many new facilities have also been built, including a new 85-acre detention centres down the road from No. 3 in Dabancheng that went up over 2019, satellite imagery shows.

The changes seem to be an at-



Security guards stand at the gates of what is officially known as a vocational skills education centre in Huocheng County. Credit: Reuters file photo

tempt to move from the makeshift and extrajudicial “training centres” into a more permanent system of prisons and pre-trial detention facilities justified under the law. While some Uyghurs have been released, others have simply been moved into this prison network.

However, researchers say many innocent people were often thrown in detention for things like going abroad or attending religious gatherings.

Darren Byler, an anthropologist studying the Uighurs at the University of Colorado, noted that many prisoners have not committed “real crimes by any standards,” and that they go through a “show” trial without due process.

“We’re moving from a police state to a mass incarceration state. Hundreds of thousands of people have disappeared from the population,” Byler said. “It’s the criminalization of normal behavior.”

During the April tour of No. 3 in Dabancheng, officials repeatedly distanced it from the “training centres” that Beijing claims to have closed.

“There was no connection between our detention centre and the training centres,” insisted Urumqi Public Security Bureau director Zhao Zhongwei.

“There’s never been one around here.” They also said the No. 3 centre was proof of China’s commitment to rehabilitation and the rule of law, with inmates provided hot meals, exercise, access to legal counsel and televised classes lecturing them on their crimes.

Rights are protected, officials say, and only lawbreakers need worry about detention. “See, the BBC report said this

was a re-education camp. It's not - it's a detention centre," said Liu Chang, an official with the foreign ministry.

However, despite the claims of officials, the evidence shows No. 3 was indeed an internment camp. A Reuters picture of the entrance in September 2018 shows that the facility used to be called the "Urumqi Vocational Skills Education and Training centre".

Publicly available documents collected by Shawn Zhang, a law student in Canada, confirm that a centre by the same name was commissioned to be built at the same location in 2017.

Records also show that Chinese conglomerate Hengfeng Information Technology won an \$11 million contract for outfitting the Urumqi "training centre". A man who answered a number for Hengfeng confirmed the company had taken part in the of the "training centre," but Hengfeng did not respond to further requests for comment.

A former construction contractor who visited the Dabancheng facility in 2018 told the AP that it was the same as the "Urumqi Vocational Skills Education and Training centre," and had been converted to a detention facility in 2019, with the nameplate switched. He declined to be named for fear of retaliation against his family. "All the former students inside became prisoners," he said.

The vast complex is ringed by 25-foot-tall concrete walls painted blue, watchtowers, and humming electric wire. Officials led AP journalists through the main entrance, past face-scanning turnstiles and rifle-toting guards in military camouflage.

In one corner of the compound, masked inmates sat in rigid formation. Most appeared to be Uighur. Zhu Hongbin, the centre's director, rapped on one of the cell's windows. At the control room, staff gazed at a wall-to-wall, God's-eye display of some two dozen

screens streaming footage from each cell. Another panel played programming from state broadcaster CCTV, which Zhu said was being shown to the inmates.

"We control what they watch," Zhu said. "We can see if they're breaking regulations, or if they might hurt or kill themselves."

The centre also screens video classes, Zhu said, to teach them about their crimes. "They need to be taught why it's bad to kill people, why it's bad to steal," Zhu said.

Twenty-two rooms with chairs and computers allow inmates to chat with lawyers, relatives, and police via video, as they are strapped to their seats. Down the corridor, an office houses a branch of the Urumqi prosecutor's office, in another sign of the switch to a formal prison system.

A nearby medical room contains a gurney, a tank of oxygen and a cabinet stocked with medicine. Guidelines hanging on the wall instruct staff on the proper protocol to deal with sick inmates – and also to force-feed inmates on hunger strikes by inserting tubes up their noses.

Zhao, the other official, said inmates are held for 15 days to a year before trial depending on their suspected crime, and the legal process is the same as in the rest of China. He said the centre was built to house inmates away from the city because of safety concerns.

Urumqi No. 3 Detention centre is comparable in size to Rikers Island in New York City, but



the region serves less than four million people compared to nearly 20 million for Rikers. At least three other detention centres are sprinkled across Urumqi, along with ten or more prisons.

The No. 3 centre did not appear to be at full capacity; one section was closed, officials said, and six to ten inmates sat in each cell, taking up only half the benches. But the latest official government statistics available, for 2019, show that there were about twice as many arrests in Xinjiang that year than before the crackdown started in 2017. Hundreds of thousands have been sentenced to prison, many to terms of five years or more. Xu Guixiang, a Xinjiang spokesperson, the higher incarceration rates “severe measures” in the “war against terror.” “Of course, during this process, the number of people sentenced in accordance with the law will increase. This is a concrete indication of our work efficiency,” Xu said. “By taking these measures, terrorists are more likely to be brought to justice.” But many relatives of those imprisoned say they were sentenced on spurious charges, and experts caution that the opacity of the Xinjiang legal system is a flag. Although China makes legal records easily accessible otherwise, almost 90 percent of criminal records in Xinjiang are not public. The handful which have leaked show that some are charged with “terrorism” or “separatism” for acts flag. Although China makes legal records easily accessible otherwise, almost 90 percent of criminal records in Xinjiang are not public. The handful which have leaked show that some are charged with “terrorism” or “separatism” acts few would consider criminal, such as warning colleagues against watching porn and swearing, or praying in prison.

Researcher Gene Bunin found that Uighurs were made to sign confessions for what the authorities called “terrorist activities.” Some were subsequently released, including one

detained in the Dabancheng facility, a relative told The Associated Press, declining to be named to avoid retribution against the former detainee.

Others were not. Police reports obtained by the Intercept detail the case of eight Uighurs in one Urumqi neighborhood detained in the “Dabancheng” facility in 2017 for reading religious texts, installing filesharing applications, or simply being an “untrustworthy person”. In late 2018, the reports show, prosecutors summoned them to makeshift meetings and sentenced them to two to five years of “study.” AP journalists did not witness any signs of torture or beating at the facility, and were unable to speak directly to any former or current detainees.

But a Uyghur who had fled Xinjiang, Zumret Dawut, said a now-deceased friend who worked at Dabancheng had witnessed treatment so brutal that she fainted. The friend, Paride Amati, said she had seen a pair of teens forced to sign confessions claiming they were involved in terrorism while studying in Egypt, and their skin had been beaten bloody and raw.

A teacher at the Dabancheng facility also called it “worse than hell,” according to a colleague at a different camp, Qelbinur Sedik. The teacher said that during classes she could hear the sounds of people being tortured with electric batons and iron chairs, according to Sedik.



Accounts of conditions in detention centres elsewhere in Xinjiang vary widely: some describe restrictive conditions but no physical abuse, while others say they were tortured. Such accounts are difficult to verify independently, and the Xinjiang authorities deny all allegations of abuse.

Chinese officials also continue to deny that

they are holding Uighurs on false charges. Down the road from the No. 3 centre, high walls and guard towers were visible in the same location as the new detention facility shown in satellite imagery.

When asked what it was, officials pleaded ignorance. "We don't know what it is," they said.

US-Trained Uyghur Scientist Found Detained After His WeChat Went Silent

RFA, 2021-07-20

The reason Tursunjan Nurmamat is detained and under investigation is unclear.

A Uyghur research scientist at a Chinese university in Shanghai who suddenly went silent in April after an active presence on social media has been confirmed detained, the latest of many intellectuals from Xinjiang to disappear from public life into internment camps or prisons.

Tursunjan Nurmamat, who had lived in the United States between 2009 and 2018 and earned doctorate from the University of Wyoming, has been in police custody for three months, according to sources at Tongji University, where he had worked since July 2018.

An official at Tongji University in Shanghai confirmed that Tursunjan is in custody and under police investigation.

"This is currently in the process of investiga-



Uyghur research scientist Tursunjan Nurmamat in an undated photo.

tion,” he said. “We know basic details, but nothing else. The Public Security Bureau is not talking with us,” the official said.

When RFA asked for the name of the Uyghur instructor detained from the school, a second university staff member mentioned Tursunjan, who was born in 1985 in Yarkand (in Chinese, Shache) county in Kashgar in the far west of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

Tursunjan, who did postdoctoral research in Texas and California, is the latest in a growing number of Uyghur intellectual, cultural, and religious thought leaders to be incarcerated in the XUAR in what experts say is a larger Chinese effort to erase Muslim and Uyghur culture and force the 12 million Uyghurs to assimilate.

The jailing of Uyghur cultural leaders, which has gotten increasingly heavy-handed since 2016, is part of a set of policies has been deemed by the U.S. and others as constituting genocide that also includes forced labor at factories and farms, forced birth control, and the detention of up to 1.8 million Uyghurs in a network of internment camps.

Abduweli Ayup, founder of Uyghur Hjelp, a Norway-based Uyghur advocacy and aid organization which maintains a list of detained Uyghur intellectuals, wrote on Twitter in June that Tursunjan had disappeared from Chinese social media two months earlier.

Abduweli told RFA he tried to investigate, but could not obtain much information on the academic, who he said focused on his studies in molecular and cellular life science in his work and avoided involvement in political activities while he was in the U.S.

Tursunjan, who also goes by the pen name Bilge, started a job at Tongji University in July 2018 and continued to post regularly online until he stopped doing so in early April, said Abduweli.

Among Tursunjan’s last posts to his WeChat account was a photo of his mother, wife, and daughter celebrating International Women’s Day on March 8.

During the first week of April, he also posted on WeChat that he was happy to have been transferred to a new job at Cell Research, a Chinese monthly peer-reviewed scientific journal covering cell biology.

But soon after Tursunjan announced that he had begun working at Cell Research, his name disappeared from the publication’s website.

“At that point we began to worry that Tursunjan had been detained,” Abduweli said.

“We spread the news on social media, and then, after looking into Tursunjan’s situation, we were able to obtain a bit of information about it. Ultimately, we are concerned about what has happened to Tursunjan,” said Abduweli.

Abduweli and several of Tursunjan’s friends in the U.S. wrote to the publishers of Cell Research and received a response that the journal was unable to provide personal information about its editors.

RFA sent an email to the journal on July 17 asking for information about Tursunjan but has not yet received a response.

Reported by Shohret Hoshur for RFA’s Uyghur Service. Translated by the Uyghur Service. Written in English by Roseanne Gerin.



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