



## THOUSANDS OF MUSLIMS DEFY CHINESE AUTHORITIES IN DEFENSE OF MOSQUE



EAST TURKISTAN PRESS AND MEDIA ASSOCIATION  
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## ARAB LEAGUE VISITS EAST TURKISTAN, REJECTS UYGHUR GENOCIDE

WASHINGTON —

June 10, 2023 VOA

Kasim Kashgar

China is using a recent visit by an Arab League delegation to East Turkistan to highlight what it says is support of its policies in the region. Experts, however, say the praise that Beijing has reportedly received from diplomats and officials who took part in the trip is nothing more than “Chinese propaganda” and an attempt to whitewash human rights violations there.

China’s treatment of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in East Turkistan is a major source of international concern. Western countries have raised allegations of forced labor, religious persecution and

some, including the United States, have classified what is happening in East Turkistan as genocide, an accusation Beijing denies.

State media reports and remarks from Chinese officials about the delegation’s visit have portrayed the trip as an outright rejection of what it called Western “accusations of ethnic genocide.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin said that during the East Turkistan visit from May 30-June 2, members of the Arab League delegation expressed their appreciation for China’s efforts in East Turkistan and praised the region’s development and stability.

“During their trip, the delegation traveled to Urumqi and Kashgar, where they

visited mosques, Islamic institutes, local enterprises, old towns and an exhibition on counterterrorism and de-radicalization, performed prayers in mosques with the locals and got a firsthand experience of their happy life,” Wang said at a press briefing in Beijing earlier this week.

“Arab countries have commended the care that Muslims in East Turkistan and people of other ethnic minority groups have received and expressed their firm support for China’s effort to promote East Turkistan’s development and ensure its stability.”

According to Wang, Arab countries have always held a just position on East Turkistan.

“What the Arab League delegation has seen with their own eyes in East Turkistan once again shows that truth will always prevail, and those who seek to smear China by manipulating East Turkistan-related issues will not have their way,” Wang said.

The Arab League, founded in 1945, is a confederation of 22 Arab nations aiming to improve coordination on common interests. Its charter promotes cooperation, renounces violence, and mediates disputes, but lacks enforcement mechanisms.

Critics point out that the apparent endorsement of China’s policies by the Arab League delegation is at odds with the findings and conclusions of the U.N. human rights office, which has highlighted serious human rights violations in East

Turkistan.

In a post on Twitter, Adrian Zenz, a senior fellow and director in China studies at the Washington-based Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, called the visit a “terrible betrayal.”

Last year, the U.N. human rights office released an assessment of the human rights situation in East Turkistan, concluding that China’s actions against Uyghurs and other minority groups may amount to crimes against humanity.

The assessment highlighted various human rights violations taking place in East Turkistan, including arbitrary detention, forced labor, cultural assimilation, surveillance, and restrictions on religious and linguistic freedoms.

According to Abdulhakim Idris, director of the Washington-based Center for Uyghur Studies, the Arab League delegation’s visit and support of China’s actions in East Turkistan is part of a Chinese propaganda campaign to conceal its mistreatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities.

“This visit is the last example of the Chinese Communist Regime’s propaganda efforts to hide the Uyghur Genocide in East Turkistan from the world public opinion,” Idris told VOA in an email, using the name East Turkistan, Uyghurs’ preferred name for the region.

Chinese media outlets Xinhua and the Global Times reported that the delegation’s visit to East Turkistan contradicted Western media portrayals.

The Chinese reports said that the Arab League delegation praised China's achievements in East Turkistan in upholding human rights, particularly highlighting China's "anti-terrorism" efforts in the region.

"The group visited a number of locations in East Turkistan and said that the region does not match what is portrayed by Western media, and it boasts harmony and stability, a rapidly growing economy and a colorful and prosperous culture, with residents living and working in peace and contentment," Xinhua said.

The visit garnered attention primarily from Chinese state media outlets such as China Daily, China Central Television, Xinhua and the Global Times. Chinese embassies and diplomats shared excerpts

from those reports on Twitter. The Arab League did not mention the visit on its website or social media platforms.

However, Idris said the statements made by the delegation should be considered in the context of economic and diplomatic ties between their countries and China.

"Today, China has made many countries from both the Arab world and the Muslim regions dependent on it, both economically and diplomatically," Idris said.

These countries are unable to respond as expected in terms of human rights and democracy due to their economic reliance on China. Instead, they favor the explanations provided by the Chinese government, he added.

## US BILL SEEKS 'ENHANCED' UYGHUR GENOCIDE SANCTIONS



France's Senate also approves a bill seeking an E.U. version of America's ban on imports tied to slave labor.

RFA Uyghur

2023.06.02

A bill introduced into the U.S. Senate on Wednesday would force businesses to disclose links to forced Uyghur labor to the Securities and Exchange Commission and provide funds for those who have escaped the East Turkistan to counter Chinese propaganda.

It follows the passage on Thursday of a bill in France's Senate that urges the European Union to copy the U.S. ban on the import of goods linked to forced Uyghur labor, which French lawmakers say has rerouted many such goods into the European single market.

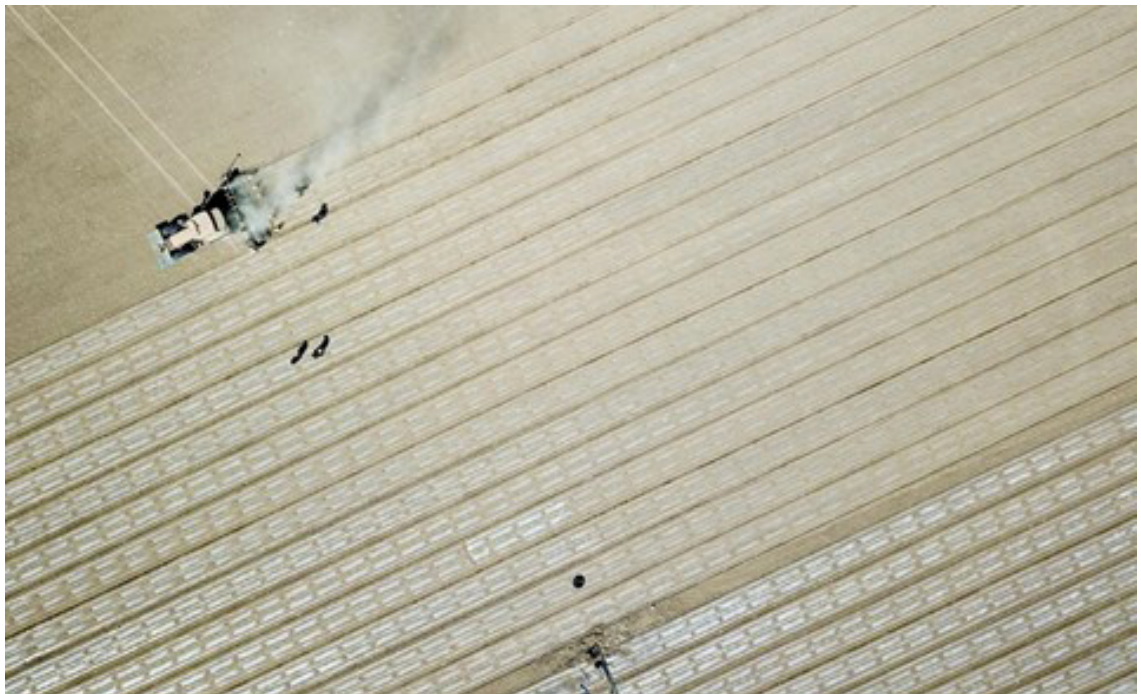
Besides requiring the SEC filing, the new U.S. Senate bill would expand existing

travel restrictions on Chinese officials linked to the genocide and provide further funding for "broadcast initiatives to counter Chinese propaganda," according to a press release.

Introduced by Sen. Marco Rubio, a Republican from Florida, and Sen. Jeff Merkley, a Democrat from Oregon, the Uyghur Genocide Accountability and Sanctions Act would also provide funding for ongoing Uyghur cultural and linguistic preservation projects.

"By building upon current legislation, this bicameral bill aims to enhance the enforcement of secondary sanctions on businesses that offer assistance to the Chinese Communist Party's ongoing atrocities against the Uyghurs," Rubio said in the press release.

If passed, the draft bill would help plug holes in the 2021 Uyghur Forced Labor



Prevention Act, and further impose penalties against those profiting from Uyghur slave labor, Rubio and Merkley said.

But to become law it still has to pass through committee in the Senate before being introduced to a vote on the floor of the chamber, and then pass the House, too, where it is being sponsored by Rep. Chris Smith, a Republican from New Jersey.

### French bill

Across the Atlantic, French senators on Thursday unanimously passed a resolution calling for Europe's own version of the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act to ban imports tied to slave labor.

Sen. Mélanie Vogel, who represents Europe Ecology – The Greens for the constituency of French citizens living abroad, told Radio Free Asia her party introduced the legislation to pressure E.U. officials.

Under Europe's single market, the 27 individual E.U. member states do not have the power to unilaterally change trade policy, with laws over imports and exports unified across the European Union.

"This resolution is basically asking for the introduction of a very efficient mechanism at the E.U. level that would ban goods made using forced labor," Vogel said. "Basically, it's asking the French government to push for this position at the E.U. level."

She said an existing E.U. proposal on the issue only seeks to ban imports of goods

after they are proven to be linked to slave labor in an extensive legal process. But the French Senate preferred a ban "based on the mechanism that was introduced in the U.S," she said, which assumes East Turkistan-made goods involved slave labor.

"So, putting the burden of proof on the companies who want to export goods into the E.U. market, and not on human rights activists to prove there are actually violations of human rights," she said. "They have to prove they did not use forced labor."

### E.U. coordination

Such a bill is needed after the 2021 U.S. law diverted many East Turkistan-made goods to Europe, said Dilnur Reyhan, head of the European Uyghur Institute and a Uyghur studies lecturer at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations in Paris.

"The goods made with Uyghur forced labor that couldn't enter the U.S. are making their way into the European market. That's why it's extremely critical that such legislation needs to pass in Europe as well," Reyhan told RFA, noting it was only the initial step.

"A resolution like this from each E.U. member state is important to pressure their governments. In order to have real impact, all 27 E.U. member states would need to pass a unified piece of legislation."

Edited by Alex Willemyns and Malcolm Foster.

## THOUSANDS OF MUSLIMS DEFY CHINESE AUTHORITIES IN DEFENSE OF MOSQUE



By Nectar Gan and Wayne Chang, CNN  
Tue May 30, 2023

CNN —

Thousands of ethnic minority Muslims surrounded a mosque in southwestern China over the weekend in a last-ditch effort to prevent what they said was an attempt by authorities to remove its dome and minarets, as a crackdown on religious freedoms widens.

The apparent alteration of a mosque belonging to the Hui ethnic group in Najiaying village, Yunnan province comes amid a sweeping campaign unleashed by China's leader Xi Jinping to "sinicize" religion.

The policy aims to purge religious faiths of foreign influence and align them more

closely with traditional Chinese culture — and the authoritarian rule of the officially atheist Communist Party.

Now, the "sinicization" campaign appears to be finally coming for Najiaying — a historic home to the Hui and an important hub for Islamic culture in Yunnan, an ethnically diverse province on China's borders with Southeast Asia.

But the push has faced a fierce backlash from local residents.

Videos posted on social media and geolocated by CNN show residents clashing with lines of police officers in riot gear, who blocked off the entrance to the mosque and pushed back the crowd with shields and batons.

Residents shouted back in anger, with

some hurling water bottles and bricks at the police, the videos show.

“This is our last bit of dignity,” a local witness told CNN. “It’s like coming to our house to demolish our home. We can’t allow that to happen.”

The source, who declined to be named over fears for personal safety, said thousands of Hui residents – including men and women, elderly and children – had gathered around the mosque on Saturday, under the close watch of more than 1,000 police officers deployed nearby.

“After arriving at the mosque, we realized that they had driven the cranes into the compound and were ready for the forced demolition,” the source said, adding that scaffolding had already been erected around the mosque.

Tensions escalated around 1 p.m., with worshipers demanding to enter the

mosque for noon prayers, the source said. They said they saw police officers hitting the crowd with batons, which prompted some residents to clash with police.

Dozens of protesters were arrested by police at the scene, the source said. Ma Ju, a prominent Hui activist who now lives in the United States and has kept close contact with Najiaying residents, said about 30 people were arrested.

CNN cannot independently verify the claims and has reached out to the local police and government for comment. CNN has also reached out to the Yunnan provincial government and its bureau for religious affairs for comment.

### ‘Our nightmare is only starting now’

The hours-long standoff on Saturday yielded a temporary win for the protesters, who streamed into the mosque as the police retreated, according to the witness and online videos.





Throughout Saturday night and Sunday, residents took turns to guard the mosque, fearing that authorities would return to demolish its large centerpiece green dome and four minarets, the source said.

But repercussions quickly followed, according to those CNN spoke with.

By Sunday afternoon, word started to spread that authorities were arresting more people, according to the source.

On Sunday evening, law enforcement authorities in Nagu township, where Najiaying is located, issued a stern but vague statement. Without mentioning the protest or the mosque, it said police were investigating an incident that took place on Saturday, which “seriously disrupted social order” and caused “vile social impact.”

The authorities also called on the

“organizers and participants” of the incident to turn themselves in before June 6 to receive leniency, and encouraged the public to report on each other.

By Monday, Najiaying was shrouded in a blanket of fear, the source said.

The internet has been cut off in many neighborhoods. Drones buzzed overhead and surveilled the village. Public loudspeakers blasted the authorities’ message on repeat, urging protesters to turn themselves in, according to the source and Ma, the US-based activist.

“It feels like our nightmare is only starting now,” the source told CNN. “Everyone is in fear...We don’t know what’s going to happen next.”

Other local residents appeared fearful to speak out.

One shop owner reached by CNN on the



phone said: “You journalists should come here to report on what’s happening to us.” When asked by CNN to explain what happened, he replied he “didn’t know” and hung up.

### ‘This is what they did to East Turkistan’

This is not the first time that Hui Muslims have engaged in a tense standoff with authorities to protect a mosque.

In 2018, thousands of Hui residents in Ningxia, in the country’s northwest, staged a sit-in protest for three days to prevent authorities from demolishing a newly constructed mosque.

The local government held off on the demolition, but later replaced the mosque’s domes and minarets with traditional Chinese-style pagodas.

The architectural overhaul of mosques has come with allegations of shrinking religious freedoms for the Hui, a 11 million-strong ethnic minority that live in scattered pockets throughout China from the northwest to the coastal cities in the east, including an officially designated “autonomous region,” Ningxia.

Believed to be distant descendants of Arab and Persian traders, the Hui have been well assimilated into broader Chinese society dominated by the ethnic Han majority.

Most speak Mandarin, live alongside the Han, and in recent decades had been given more space to practice their faith than other ethnic groups.

But Hui activists say their ethnic group



has become the latest target in the Communist Party's crackdown on Islam, which began in the western region of East Turkistan.

Since at least 2017, the Chinese government has been accused of detaining more than a million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in internment camps in East Turkistan and conducting forceful assimilation to suppress their cultural and religious identity.

A United Nations report last year accused the Chinese government of serious human rights violations against Uyghurs that may amount to "crime against humanity."

China has repeatedly denied these accusations and insisted that the massive camps are voluntary "vocational training centers."

### 'Not just domes'

Hui activists and rights groups claim authorities have stepped up efforts in

recent years to restrict religious practices of Hui Muslims across China, including the shuttering of Islamic schools, Arabic classes and barring children from learning and practicing Islam.

The implementation of the "sinicization" campaign has "had the effect of expunging communities of their connections to Hui culture, religion, and each other so thoroughly that some leaders view the erasure of a meaningful Hui identity within another generation as being a likely possibility," according to a report submitted to a UN treaty body in January by the Chinese Human Rights Defenders and the Hope Umbrella International Foundation.

Ma, the US-based Hui activist who founded the Hope Umbrella International Foundation, said Hui in China are now living in a constant state of fear.

Over two hundred mosques in Yunnan



have already lost their domes and minarets, according to Ma, adding to the more than a thousand mosques in the country's northwest.

CNN is unable to independently verify the number of mosques affected, and has reached out to the Chinese government for comment on the accusations made by Hui activists.

“At first, people thought it was only a question of architectural style...but it soon became apparent that (the government) is not only removing the domes from the mosques, but also removing their religious and social functionality,” Ma said.

Under a raft of restrictions imposed by the government, many Hui are now afraid to go to the mosque, which has long been a center of religious and social life for their communities, Ma said.

The end goal of the party is to implement a policy of “cultural and religious

genocide,” just as it did in East Turkistan, he said. The Chinese government has denied accusations of genocide.

For the resident in Najiaying, the government's plan to change the design of the mosque is only the harbinger of a harsher crackdown to come.

“This is only the first step. What we worry about is after that, (the authorities) will ban our children from going to (religious) classes, bar minors from entering mosques and forbid us from studying the Quran,” they said, referring to the alleged restrictions that have been imposed on Hui communities across China.

“After they trampled on your dignity, they will suppress you step by step, and assimilate the Hui ethnic group completely into the Han, generation by generation. Because we know, this is what they did to East Turkistan,” they said.

Despite the permeating culture of fear,



they have vowed to “fight till the end” for the freedom of belief and the dignity of the Hui ethnicity.

“We commoners don’t ask for much. We just want to have our own religious

freedom. We just want to live in peace,” they said.

“I want the world to know what we’re going through right now, and what we’re fearing next.”



## All Static & Noise: Film Highlights Uyghurs’ Fight and Plight

**All Static & Noise received the Best Picture award in the Crime & Conspiracy category at the 2023 Doc Edge Festival. After its premiere at the Capitol in Auckland on June 1, it will soon hit the screen at the Roxy in Wellington on June 9.**

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screen at the Roxy in Wellington on June 9.

Asia Media Center, 3 June 2023

Carla Teng

The viewers deeply resonated with the documentary, and it has been hailed by China Change as “masterful and moving” and one of the most crucial works of cinema today.

The movie focuses on the systematic oppression and persecution faced by Uyghur and Kazakh nationals residing in the western region of China.

The Uyghurs, who are primarily Muslim and belong to an ethnic minority, inhabit the East Turkistan, historically known as East Turkistan. The Chinese government has been accused of conducting a wide-ranging campaign of repression against the Uyghur community, attracting significant international attention and condemnation.

These grave circumstances compelled producer Janice Englehart to create a film addressing this issue.

In an interview with the Asia Media Centre,

Englehart narrated her experience living in China at a time when the human rights violations against Uyghurs occurred. She said, “I was living in Beijing, and I have several Uyghur friends whose parents were taken away... I was bearing witness of everything that’s going around me, and over the years seeing China’s human rights abuse, in this case targeting Uyghurs people, it seems to be an extraordinary higher level of oppression.”

Englehart works in arts and film, and she believes that the story should be told to a wider audience, so that the “western world would understand it.” She contacted her good friend, David Novack, an award-winning filmmaker to join this project.

Novack, the director of All Static & Noise, embraced the project without hesitation, and as he delved deeper into the research, interviews, writing, and directing the documentary, it became increasingly personal to him.



Being of a Jewish descent, Novack shared that his own family had suffered tragic losses amid the Holocaust in the 1930s during the Third Reich. He emphasised the Jewish mantra of “never again.” Which calls for preventing such atrocities from occurring in the future, “never again should this happen, never again! And it’s very important that we apply the idea ‘never again’ to everybody, this really compelled me to take a look at this [project],” he said.

During their journey, the team embarked on travels to various locations worldwide to interview Uyghur survivors and their family members who managed to flee China. However, due to film limitations, they had to select a smaller number of individuals as case studies, which has proven to be a heart-wrenching process.

The team aimed to showcase each story as extensively as possible, but Nancy Novack, an Emmy award-winning editor and one of the film’s writers, found it challenging to narrow the voices to be featured in the documentary.

She explained, “Because the majority of the story shared a similar trajectory, if somebody who is a Uyghur has left the country and has no contact to anymore with their family, and is trying to find them, that’s one version and there were multiple Uyghurs and Kazakhs who have that story... So, you’ve picked one that represents those 20 versions of the story. However, we choose, either the most articulate or carries emotional weight or there’s a father-son involved like something that exemplifies everybody.”

Abduweli Ayup, one of the prominent case studies in the film, is a Uyghur linguist, poet, and author who was previously incarcerated for political reasons.

The Chinese authorities detained him for his involvement in establishing pre-schools specifically for Uyghur children in Ürümqi and Kashgar. These schools prioritised the teaching of the Uyghur language, which had already been prohibited by the government in primary, middle, and high schools, as well as universities.



Ayup advocated vehemently for the preservation of the Uyghur language and argued that kindergartens were not subject to government restrictions. He saw this as an opportunity for his community to continue learning and practicing their language, especially among the younger generation.

However, it was his belief in the significance of Uyghur language education that ultimately led to his imprisonment.

Having endured torture during his time in prison, Abduweli Ayup was finally released in 2014.

In 2015, he and his family managed to escape China and sought asylum in Norway. While this may appear fortunate, Ayup never turned his back on his people. Even while residing overseas, he continued to tirelessly fight for Uyghur rights. He played a crucial role as a translator, assisting the Uyghur community in communicating with the

media, lawyers, academics, officials, human rights advocates, and leaders of international organisations.

Ayup's involvement in the documentary *All Static & Noise* was of great significance. As an insider within the Uyghur community, he earned the trust of his people to share their stories on camera, despite the risks involved. His contributions to the film were invaluable, ensuring that the voices and experiences of the Uyghur people were authentically represented.

The film was over five years in the making, and according to Ayup, it was a challenging task to persuade people to share their stories on camera. He said, "At the beginning it was really hard to convince people especially in 2018. Because people don't know what will happen and they are not really like confident on what will happen when they speak up because there is no [clear]





consequence yet.”

Nevertheless, despite the uncertainties, many individuals still chose to speak out during that time because they strongly believed that the situation was unjust. They saw media interviews as a potential means to be reunited with their “missing” or “arrested” family members.

Ayup noted, if they are to undertake the filming project today, it would be extremely difficult to find Uyghurs willing to speak on camera as they are now aware of the consequences and fear has become normalised within the Uyghur community.

The documentary also shed light on the mass internment camps, which the Chinese government claimed to be “re-education” or “vocational training” centres.

Disturbingly, over a million and a half Uyghurs have been forcibly detained in these camps. Once inside, they were

subjected to pervasive surveillance and intense political indoctrination.

The film presented case studies of Uyghur and Kazakh nationals who survived the harrowing physical and psychological abuse inflicted upon them within these camps.

The atrocities they endured included beatings, torture in methods known as “tiger chairs” interrogations, forced drugging, and the horrifying sexual assault of women and girls.

In addition to compiling firsthand accounts, the production team also obtained satellite imagery of the camps in East Turkistan. They also utilised the leaked classified documents in 2019, such as the China Cables and the East Turkistan Papers.

With the help of seasoned researchers, the team acquired and analysed available Chinese government procurement



files that were publicly available. This data allowed them to investigate the government’s acquisitions and the flow of equipment to China’s western region. This information provided additional context and evidence in their research and documentation of the situation in East Turkistan.

All Static & Noise can also be streamed online, and the team anticipates that it will raise awareness and prompt world leaders to take action against the atrocities being committed against the Uyghur people, pressing China to address their human rights violations.

Nancy Novack expressed, “There’s so many distraction in the world that seems to take precedents over something so tragic and so enormous, and that the world is not standing up and screaming about this is outrageous to me, and if this film gets to enough people, who suddenly stand-up and say, ‘shut-down these camps and release all these people, there should be no concentration camps in the

world right now,’ then that would be one of my goals and one of my hopes.”

Despite facing significant challenges, Abduweli Ayup remains hopeful that the situation will improve for the Uyghur community as he stressed, “the Chinese government can destroy our schools and our mosques, but they will never destroy our soul – we are here!”

He believes that the film can serve as a tool to educate the public about the Uyghur struggle and their dire circumstances. As responsible global citizens, he emphasises the power individuals have in helping to stop this monstrosity, particularly by boycotting products made in China that may involve forced labor.

With the documentary currently being showcased in New Zealand, Ayup hopes that it will raise awareness among the country’s parliament and encourage them to denounce Beijing’s actions as “genocide.”

He also hopes that New Zealand will consider granting refugee status to



My parents were taken around May 2017.

Uyghurs who are living in exile, as many of them are stateless after having their passports cancelled by the Chinese government. Ayup wishes for the New Zealand government to examine their situation and provide them with the

opportunity to seek asylum.

Banner image: Footage of Uyghur detainees, shackled and blindfolded, in Korla West Train Station. Photo: All Static & Noise



## ESCAPING CHINA WITH A SPOON AND A RUSTY NAIL

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TEO URATADZE

5 JUNE 2023

### Coda Story

On April 24, a 40-year-old Uyghur man was reported to have died in a detention center in Thailand. Just a couple of months earlier, in February, another Uyghur man in his forties died in the same center, where about 50 Uyghurs are currently held awaiting possible deportation to China. Over 200 Uyghurs were detained in Thailand in 2014, and

about a hundred were estimated to have been deported to China where their lives were under threat. Activists and human rights groups in Germany and several U.S. cities recently protested outside Thai consulates, demanding the release of Uyghurs still held in detention centers.

Hundreds of Uyghurs fled China in 2014, as the Chinese authorities launched a crackdown on the Muslim-majority ethnic group native to the northwest region of East Turkistan. The aim, the government said, was to stamp out extremism and

separatist movements in the region. The authorities called it the “strike hard campaign against violent terrorism” and created a program of repression to closely monitor, surveil and control the Uyghur population.

The authorities bulldozed mosques, saw any expression of religion as extremist and confiscated Qurans. By 2018, as many as one million Uyghurs had been sent to so-called “re-education” camps. Across the region, an extensive high-tech system of surveillance was rolled out to monitor every movement of the Uyghur population. This remains the case to this day, with the Chinese police in Urumqi, the capital of East Turkistan, reportedly requiring residents to download a mobile app which enables them to monitor phones.

Back in 2014, Uyghurs seeking to flee the burgeoning crackdown were forced to take a notoriously dangerous route,

known as the “smugglers’ road,” through Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand into Malaysia — from there, they could reach Turkey. Though Malaysia had previously deported some Uyghur Muslims to China, in 2018, a Malaysian court released 11 Uyghurs on human rights grounds and allowed them safe passage to Turkey. By September 2020, despite Chinese anger, Malaysia declared it would not extradite Uyghurs seeking refuge in a third country.

But before they could make it to Malaysia, many Uyghurs were detained by the immigration authorities in Thailand and returned to China. Human rights groups condemned the deportations, saying that Uyghurs returned to China “disappear into a black hole” and face persecution and torture upon their return.

Hashim Mohammed, 26, was 16 when he left China. He spent three years in detention in Thailand before making a dramatic escape. He now lives in Turkey



— but thoughts of his fellow inmates, who remain in Thai detention, are with him every day. This is his account of how he made it out of China through the smugglers' road.

### Hashim's Story

On New Year's Day, in 2019, I was released from immigration detention in Istanbul. It was late evening — around 10 p.m. It was the first time I had walked free in five years. And it was the end of my long journey from China's Uyghur region, which I ran away from in 2014.

It started back in the city of Urumqi in East Turkistan, 10 years ago now. I was 16 years old and had recently begun boxing at my local gym. In the evenings, I started to spend some time reciting and reading the Quran. The local Chinese authorities were beginning their mass crackdown on Uyghurs in the name of combating terrorist activity. Any display of religious devotion was deemed suspicious.

The local police considered my boxing gym to be a sinister and dangerous place. They kept asking us what we were training for. They thought we were planning something. They started arresting some of the students and coaches at the gym. Police visited my house and went through all my possessions. They couldn't find anything.

After some time, the gym closed — like lots of similar gyms all over the Uyghur region. People around me were being arrested, seemingly for no good reason. I realized I couldn't live the way I wanted in

my hometown, so I decided to leave.

At that time, thousands of Uyghurs were doing the same thing. I had heard of a smugglers' route out of China, through Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and eventually to Malaysia. From there, I'd be able to fly to Turkey and start a new life. We called it the "illegal way." It's very quick once you leave China, it only takes seven days to get to Malaysia.

At the border leaving China, we met with the smugglers who would get us out. They stuffed around 12 of us into a regular car, all of us sitting on top of each other. I was traveling alone, I didn't know anyone else in the car.

I remember one guy, Muhammad, who I met in the car for the first time. He was from the same area as me. He was with his wife and two kids and seemed friendly.

The road was terrifying. There was a pit of anxiety in my stomach as the smugglers drove through the mountainous jungle at night at breakneck speed. I watched the speedometer needle always hovering above 100 kmph (about 60 mph), and I couldn't help thinking about how many people were in the car. We heard about another group, crossing the border into Cambodia in a boat, who nearly drowned. After just seven days, we reached Thailand and the border with Malaysia. We sat in the jungle, trying to decide what to do — we could try climbing the border fence.

But we also saw a rumor on WhatsApp that if you handed yourself in to the Thai

border police, they would let you cross the border to Malaysia and fly onward to Turkey within 15 days. People on the app were saying some Uyghurs had already managed it. At this point, we'd been sleeping outside, in the jungle, for days, and we believed it. We handed ourselves in, and the police took a group of us to a local immigration detention center in the Thai jungle.

Fifteen days slipped by, and we began to realize that we'd made a terrible mistake. With every day that passed, our hope that we would get to Turkey slipped away a little further. No one came to help us. We were worried that the Thai authorities would send us back to China.

I was put in a dark cell with 12 guys — all Uyghurs like me, all trying to escape China. Throughout our time in jail, we lived under the constant threat of being deported back to China. We were terrified of that prospect. We tried many times to escape.

I never imagined that I would stay there for three years and eight months, from the ages of 16 to 19. I used to dream about what life would be like if I was free. I thought about simply walking down the street and could hardly imagine it.

There were no windows in the cell, just a little vent at the very top of the room. We used to take turns climbing up, using a rope made out of plastic bags, just to look through the vent. Through the grill, we could see that Thailand was very beautiful. It was so lush. We had never seen such a beautiful, green place. Day

and night, we climbed up the rope to peer out through the vent.

We knew that the detention center we were in was very close to the Thai border. One guy who I shared the cell with figured out something about the place we were in. The walls, he said, in this building built for the heat were actually very thin.

We managed to get hold of two tools. A spoon and an old nail.

We began, painstakingly, to gouge a hole in the wall of the bathroom block. We took turns. Day and night, we had a rota and quietly scraped away at the wall, making a hole just big enough for a man to fit through. There was a camera in the cell, and the guards checked on us frequently. But they didn't check the bathroom — and the camera couldn't see into the bathroom area, either.

We all got calluses and cuts on our hands from using these flimsy tools to try to dig through the wall. We each pulled 30-minute shifts. To the guards watching the cameras, it looked like we were just taking showers.

The guys in the cell next door to ours were working on a hole of their own. We planned to coordinate our breakout at the same time, at 2 a.m. on a Sunday.

We dug through as much of the wall as we could, without breaking through to the other side until the last moment. There was just a thin layer of plaster between us and the outside world. We drew numbers to decide who would be the first to climb out. Out of 12 people, I drew the

number four. A good number, all things considered. My friend Muhammad, who I met on the journey to Thailand, pulled number nine. Not so good.

That Sunday, we all pretended to go to sleep. With the guards checking on us every few hours, we lay there with our eyes shut and our minds racing, thinking about what we were about to do.

Two a.m. rolled around. Quietly, carefully, we removed the last piece of the wall, pulling it inward without a noise. The first, second and third man slipped through the hole, jumped down and ran out of the compound. Then it was my turn. I clambered through the hole, jumped over the barbed wire below me and ran.

The guys in the next cell had not prepared things as well as us. They still had a thick layer of cement to break through. They ripped the basin off the bathroom wall and used it to smash through the last layer. It made an awful sound. The guards came running. Six more guys got out after me, but two didn't make it. One of them was Muhammad.

The detention center we were in wasn't very high security. The gate into the complex had been left unlocked. We sprinted out of it, barefoot, in just our shorts and t-shirts, and ran into the jungle on the other side of the road, where we all scattered.

I hid out for eight days in the jungle as the guards and the local police tracked us through the trees. I had saved some food from my prison rations and drank the

water that dripped off the leaves in the humidity.

It's impossible to move through the undergrowth without making a lot of noise — so when the police got close, we had to just stay dead still and hope they wouldn't find us. At one point, we were completely surrounded by the police and could hear their voices and their dogs barking and see their flashlights through the trees. It was terrifying.

Finally, after days of walking and hiding in the undergrowth, we made it to Thailand's border with Malaysia. It's a tall fence, topped with barbed wire. I managed to climb it and jump over — but the guy I was with couldn't make it. He was later caught and sent back to detention.

In total, there were 20 of us who had managed to break out of the Thai jail. Eleven made it to Malaysia. The others were caught and are still in the detention center in Thailand.

After spending another year in detention in Malaysia, I was finally able to leave for Turkey. After two months in Turkish immigration detention, I walked free. I had spent my best years — from the age of 16 until 21 — in a cell. I feel such sorrow when I think of the others who didn't make it. It's a helpless feeling, knowing they're still in there, living under the threat of being sent back to China.

Now I have a good life in Istanbul. Every morning, I go to the boxing gym. I'd like to get married and start my own family here. But half of me lives in my home

region, and my dream is to one day go back to my home country.

Muhammad, my friend who I met on the smuggler's road, is still in the Thai jail. He's such an open and friendly person, and he was like my older brother inside. When the hope drained out of me and I

broke down, he always reassured me and tried to calm me down. He would tell me stories about the history of Islam and the history of the Uyghur people. I'll always be grateful to him for that. I think about him, and the other Uyghurs still trapped in Thailand, all the time.





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