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A Wall Street Journal investigation reveals what goes on inside China's growing network of internment camps, where hundreds of thousands of ethnic Uighurs are believed to have been detained. Screenshot/Video: Clément Bürge

WORLD | ASIA

China's Uighur Camps Swell as Beijing Widens the Dragnet

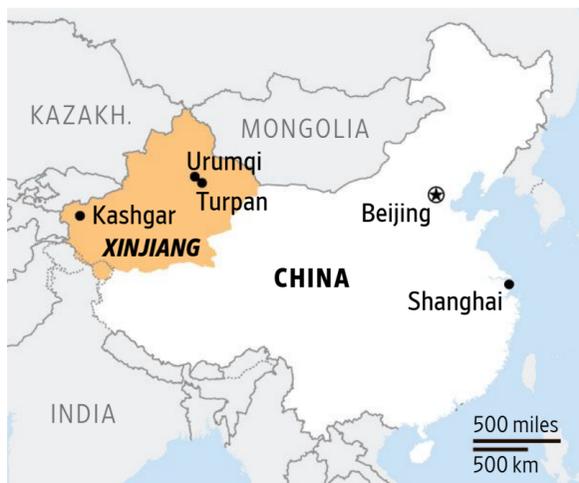
Satellite images show expansion of 're-education' centers in China's Xinjiang region

By *Eva Dou* in Beijing, *Jeremy Page* in Almaty, Kazakhstan and *Josh Chin* in Turpan, China

91 COMMENTS

Aug. 17, 2018 3:41 p.m. ET

China has sharply expanded an internment program that initially targeted ethnic Uighur extremists but is now confining vast numbers of [the largely Muslim minority group](#), including the secular, old and infirm, in camps across the country's northwest.



Up to one million people, or about 7% of the Muslim population in China's Xinjiang region, have now been incarcerated in an expanding network of "political re-education" camps, according to U.S. officials and United Nations experts.

As the camps have swelled

in size, some Uighurs living outside China say that relatives—mainly, but not all, older people—have died in detention or shortly after their release.

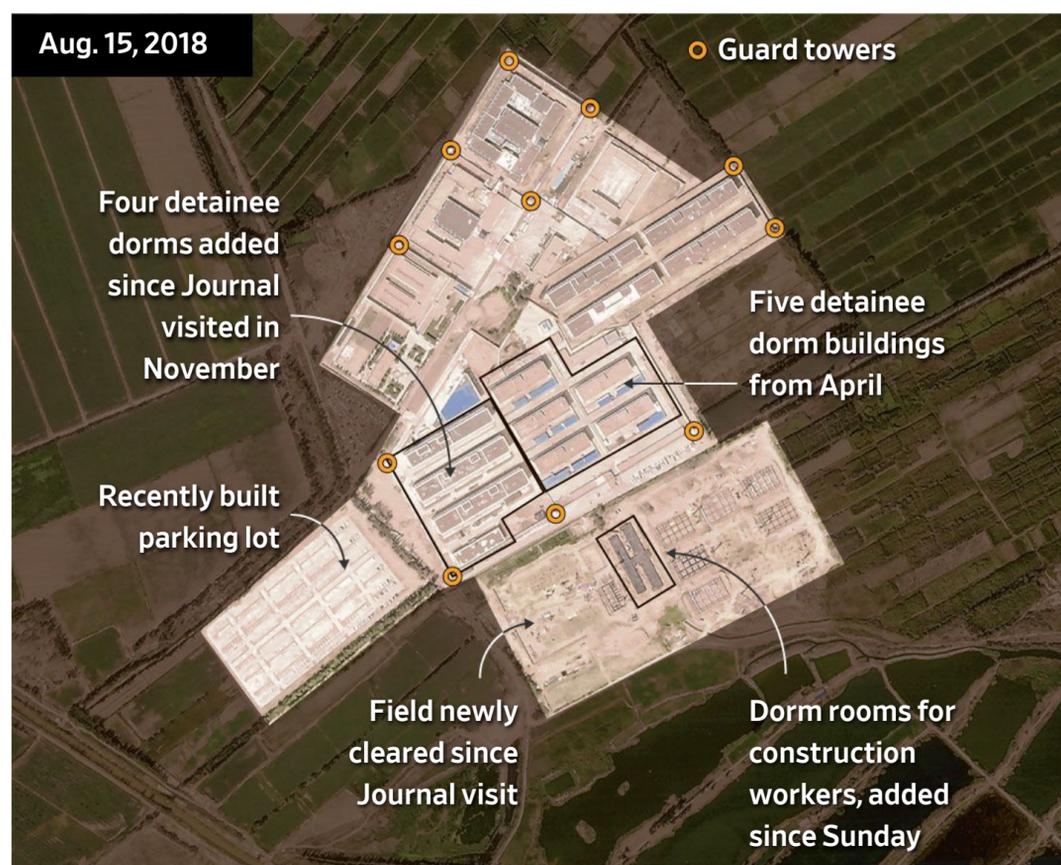
Satellite images reviewed by The Wall Street Journal and a specialist in photo analysis show that camps have been growing. Construction work has been carried out on some within the past two weeks, including at one near the western city of Kashgar that has doubled in size since Journal reporters visited in November.

The full extent of the internment program was long obscured because many Uighurs feared speaking out. Now more are recounting experiences, including six former inmates interviewed by the Journal who described how they or other detainees had been bound to chairs and deprived of adequate food.

“They would also tell us about religion, saying there is no such thing as religion, why do you believe in religion, there is no God,” said Ablikim, a 22-year-old Uighur former inmate who asked to be identified only by his first name.

Growing Camp

Satellite images show the rapid expansion of a re-education camp in Shule county, near Kashgar, China from April 17, 2017 to Aug. 15, 2018. The camp has doubled in size since Wall Street Journal reporters visited it in November.



Sources: Planet Labs (photos); Melissa Hanham, expert in analysis of satellite imagery at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (structures)

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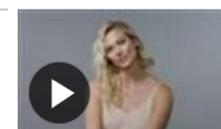
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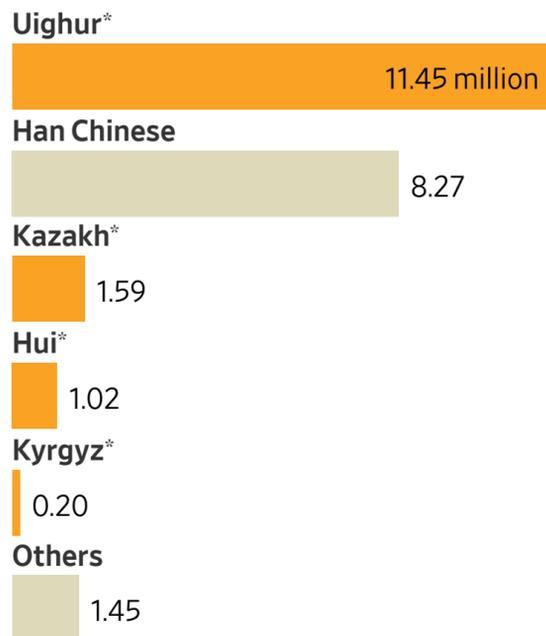
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The Journal also spoke to three dozen relatives of detainees, five of whom reported that family members had died in camps or soon after their release. Many said they had struggled to determine where their relatives were being held and the state of their health.

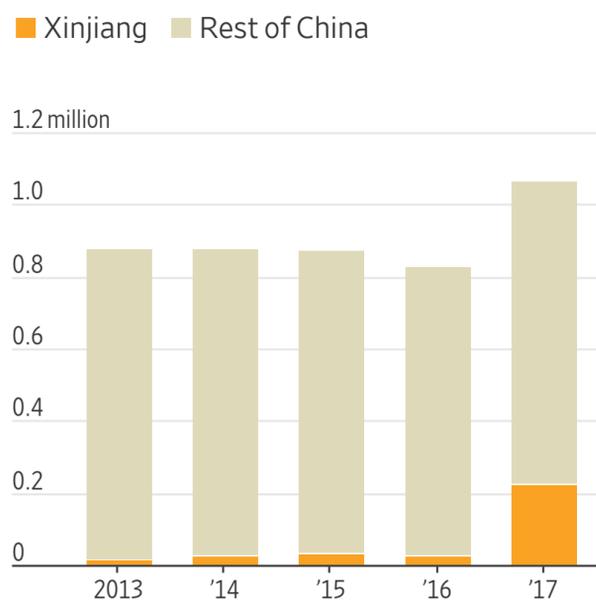
A senior Chinese official, Hu Lianhe of the United Front Work Department, publicly acknowledged the existence of the camps for the first time this week but said they were “vocational training centers.”

Xinjiang’s ethnic makeup in 2016



* Mostly Muslim
Source: Xinjiang Statistical Bureau

Criminal arrests



Note: 2013 and 2017 Xinjiang and 2017 China data are estimates calculated from the other available data in the work reports.

Source: Xinjiang People’s Procuratorate and Supreme People’s Procuratorate annual work reports via Chinese Human Rights Defenders

Responding to questions from a U.N. panel, Mr. Hu said there is no “arbitrary detention” in Xinjiang and denied one million people were being held. He didn’t say how many people were in the centers.

China has struggled for decades to curb separatist sentiment among its Turkic-speaking Uighurs, who briefly achieved statehood twice, in the 1930s and 1940s. Some of Xinjiang’s 11 million Uighurs still seek an independent homeland they call East Turkestan in the oil-rich region.





Beijing blames Uighur separatists for dozens of attacks on government targets, and says they have links to jihadist groups. Some recent attacks have borne jihadist hallmarks and counterterrorism experts say dozens of Uighurs have joined Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Even so, many experts on the region and Uighur activists say unrest there is driven more by China's heavy-handed policing, strict limits on religious activity, and preferential policies for non-Uighur migrants to the region.

[China stepped up many of those restrictions in the past two years](#), banning men from growing beards and women from wearing veils, and introducing what many experts regard as the world's most extensive electronic surveillance program.

The widening scope of the internment program suggests Beijing is now seeking to erase a sense of Islamic identity among Uighurs, and other Muslim ethnic groups, in its biggest program of mass extrajudicial detentions since the 1950s, researchers say.

“Re-education is the next level,” said Adrian Zenz, a researcher at the European School of Culture & Theology in Germany. Harsh policing was costly and created tension, he said, “so the long-term solution is to actually change people.”



A police station overlooks a re-education camp in Turpan's New District, near the former home of Murat Harri Uyghur's parents. The site features multiple guard towers and a room where relatives can register to visit with detainees. PHOTO: JOSH CHIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

At one internment camp in the oasis city of Turpan, the site of an ancient Silk Road settlement, a sign on one of the main buildings read in red Chinese characters: “Sense the party's thought, obey the party's words, follow the party's lead.” Guards shouted at an approaching Journal reporter to leave the area.

The center, surrounded by 15-foot-high walls topped with razor wire and punctuated with guard towers, has expanded since June last year with new buildings added as recently as this month, according to satellite images from U.S.-based Planet Labs Inc.

Ablikim, who is from Turpan, said he was studying international relations in Kazakhstan when Turpan police telephoned him in February and warned him his family would face trouble if he didn't return to Xinjiang.

Upon arrival, police took him to a complex on Turpan's outskirts with barbed wire and armed guards.

Ablikim said he was questioned there for days, spending up to nine hours at a time bound to a chair by his ankles and hands, which were handcuffed behind his back. Interrogators wanted to know whether he was involved with religious groups abroad. He said he wasn't.

He was eventually permitted to join other inmates. The prisoners were awakened at 5 a.m. each morning and after a 45-minute run, shouting "The Communist Party is good!" were fed thin soup and steamed bread, he said.



Police patrol in a night food market near the Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang, region, a day before the Eid al-Fitr holiday in 2017. PHOTO: JOHANNES EISELE/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Next came political classes, which included reading Communist Party documents, watching videos about President Xi Jinping and singing patriotic songs such as "Without the Communist Party, there wouldn't be a new China!" for up to four hours daily.

He and other former inmates interviewed by the Journal said they were instructed that they shouldn't pray, keep a copy of the Quran or fast during Ramadan. Some said they were forced to eat pork, which Islam forbids.

"They said we should give thanks not to Allah, but to Xi Jinping," said one Uighur former inmate, who declined to be identified.

Last month, the U.S. State Department issued its most critical statement yet on Xinjiang, expressing concern over detention of "hundreds of thousands, and possibly millions" of Uighurs and other Muslims. It also said there had been reports of deaths in the camps.



Finnish citizen Murat Harri Uyghur, 33, said his mother Tiemuer Guihuahan, 57, a former civil servant and journalist for a state-run newspaper in Xinjiang's Turpan city, was taken in to a re-education center last year. Mr. Uyghur, a doctor, said he stayed quiet at first to try to protect his father. In January, his father Wufuer Saitiniyazi, 57, also disappeared. At Shanghai Airport in February 2017, Mr. Uyghur says he was forced to take off all his clothes in an interrogation room and have his voice recorded reading aloud in Uighur, and his request to contact Finnish consular services was refused. PHOTO: MURAT HARRI UYGHUR

January, his father, a diabetic retired government translator, was also taken to a camp.

He described his parents as secular Muslims who weren't involved in political activity; his father occasionally drank alcohol and his mother didn't wear a head scarf.

He said he hasn't heard from either since they were confined and has been unable to determine their exact whereabouts, although friends in Turpan told him there were three camps around the city. Turpan's city government and police didn't respond to requests for comment.

Earlier this month, he learned his aunt in Turpan had tried in vain to discover which camp his father was in.

"It's like a black hole. People go in, but they don't come out," Mr. Uyghur said of the camps. "I'm afraid of the worst now."



Overseas relatives of Adalet Teyip, 63, were told in June that she had died during police questioning in the city of Turpan. Her daughter-in-law Adalet Rehim, 34, who lives in Canada, said Ms. Teyip was taken to a re-education center a year ago. 'We only know she passed away and they didn't show her body,' said Ms. Rehim.

China's foreign ministry said in a faxed statement that "all ethnic groups are living in harmony" in Xinjiang. "It is useless to create rumors and smears," it said. China's public security ministry didn't respond to requests for comment, nor did Xinjiang's regional government or police.

Murat Harri Uyghur, a doctor in Finland, said he learned last year from his father that his 57-year-old mother, from Turpan, had been taken to a "school" to learn "patriotic things." In

Mr. Zenz, the researcher in Germany, said local authorities in parts of Xinjiang have been setting up "transformation through education" centers to tackle extremism since around 2014.

He said Xinjiang's regional government appeared to have formally endorsed the regionwide program around April 2017, when it published "regulations on de-extremification."

Mr. Zenz estimates there are now up to 1,300 camps, and has found government procurement and construction bids for 78, ranging from prison-style facilities to smaller schools with extra security where visitors can only talk to students via videoconferencing.

The most common reasons for detention include traveling abroad, contacting or visiting relatives outside China, and having WhatsApp on their phones, according to former inmates and detainees' relatives.

Adalet Rehim, 34, a Uighur in Canada, said she was told in June that her 63-year-old mother-in-law, Adalet Teyip, had died during police questioning three months earlier in Turpan.

Ms. Teyip was in good health before she was taken with her husband to a re-education center a year ago, she said.

“We only know she passed away and they didn't show her body, even didn't return back her body,” said Ms. Rehim. Her father-in-law is still in a camp, she said.

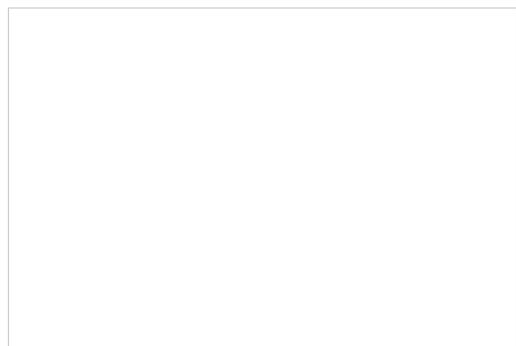
—*Crystal Tai and Paolo Bosonin in Hong Kong contributed to this article.*

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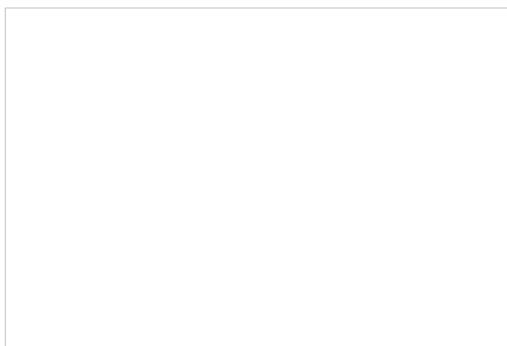
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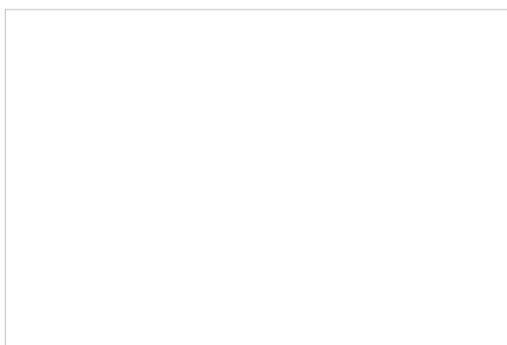
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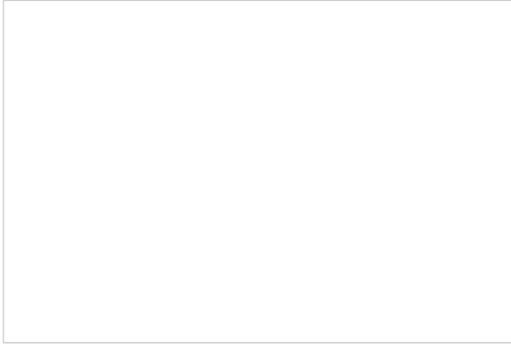
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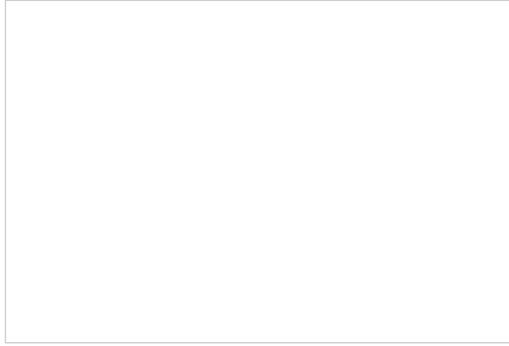
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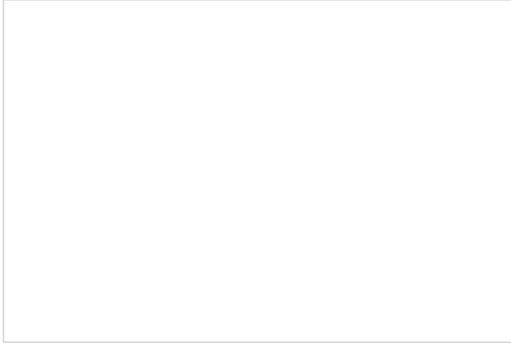
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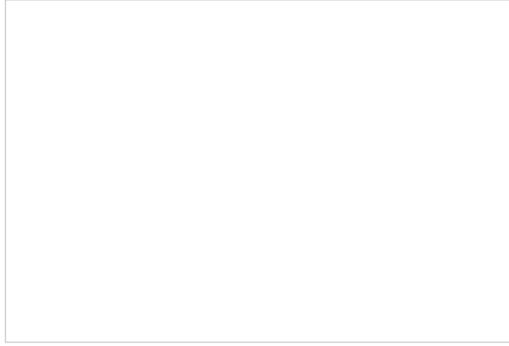


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