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SOCHUM: Uyghur Muslims in China

Background Guide

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Sensitivity Statement

You are assuming the roles and responsibilities of diplomats, and therefore will be held to the ethical standards of the role. During NGMUN, we expect all delegate behavior to reflect the gravity and sensitivity of the international and individual impact of the topics being addressed, just as such topics would be addressed by professional diplomats. While the issues you debate are on the world stage and may seem distant from your lived experience, we ask that you approach debate with a high level of respect and sensitivity for others. Absolutely no racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, or any other forms of discrimination will be tolerated in or out of committee. This includes any such harmful rhetoric that can be attributed to the country or character you are representing. Any discriminatory language or ideas in speeches, resolutions, or at any other point in the conference is prohibited.



Committee Background

The Social, Humanitarian, and Cultural Committee, known as SOCHUM, is the third committee of the United Nations General Assembly and was founded at the UN's inception in 1945. As a General Assembly committee, all countries have a seat at the table, and no country has more power than the other (no veto powers). As the name implies, the committee focuses on issues regarding fundamental human rights in the international community, such as women's rights and empowerment, global treatment of refugees, and the reduction of racism along with many others.¹ In NGMUN's SOCHUM committee, delegates will be focused on the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in China.

Structure of the Committee

Since SOCHUM is a General Assembly (GA) committee, delegates will be creating resolutions to address the topic at hand. Although there will be multiple blocs with working papers, the committee will work towards the goal of passing a single resolution at the end of the committee sessions. To pass a resolution, there must be a simple majority voting in favor of said resolution. Delegates will only be allowed to work on draft resolutions during unmoderated caucuses. I recommend that you all remind yourselves of typical General Assembly committee proceedings, as we will be following those guidelines for this committee.

Contextual History

Since the reign of Chinese Dynasties, religion has formed the premise of everyday life and thinking. Among the various religions present, Confucianism is undoubtedly the most significant. Proposed by Confucius, this religion was primarily centered around the ideals of humaneness, ritual, and filial piety (respect for elders). Though Confucianism was initially founded as a way to interpret and revive the unnamed religion of the Zhou dynasty, many emperors came to embrace the religion to promote law, order, and the status quo.² In addition to Confucianism, Taoism also rose to be a primary religion of many imperial dynasties, such as the Tang Dynasty. Its focus on spiritual immortality and living in harmony with nature proved to have a profound

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/ga/third/index.shtml>

² "Confucianism," *Asia Society*, <https://asiasociety.org/education/confucianism>



impact on Chinese culture, art, literature, medicine, and numerous other aspects of society.³ Historically, Taoism has been heavily persecuted, as dynasties sought to make Confucianism the sole religion of the region and dictators such as Mao Zedong looked to eradicate traditional and religious beliefs.⁴ Lastly, Buddhism also grew to be a defining facet of China's religious history. Though not nearly as prominent as Confucianism or Taoism, Buddhism still had far-reaching effects in China, largely due to its goal of attaining "nirvana." While it did take over a century for Buddhism to be assimilated into Chinese culture, the religion united the Chinese people into a community of believers. This unification helped the Chinese overcome a period of war and unrest during the Warring States period.⁵

Islam was initially introduced as a religion to China in the seventh century by Arab and Persian merchants who settled in port cities on China's southeastern coast. However, it was not until the Mongol conquest in the 13th century and the subsequent arrival of more permanent settlers from Central Asia that Islam began to spread inland.⁶ As the religion began to flourish throughout China, many populated the autonomous region of Xinjiang. There, local civilians underwent a gradual process of Turkicization and Islamization. Naturally, Muslims comprised a significant portion of the population, and the Xinjiang region became a topic of great contention.⁷ Overall, China's long and interactive relationship with various tribes and empires throughout Asia and Europe through diplomacy, trade, war, and subordination paved the way for a large, sustained Muslim community within China.

Although the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has a long history of restricting religious freedom, in recent decades, it has become increasingly hostile toward religion and has initiated campaigns to "sinicize" Islam, Tibetan Buddhism, and Christianity to rid them of what it deems "foreign" influences. Specifically, to do so, the communist Chinese government has created high-tech surveillance, utilizing facial recognition and artificial intelligence to monitor and harass practitioners of these religions. These forms of surveillance are especially prevalent in the autonomous region of Xinjiang, as independent experts estimate that between 900,000 and 1.8 million Uyghur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps

³ Emily Mark, "Taoism," February 22, 2016, *World History*, <https://www.worldhistory.org/Taoism/>

⁴ "Cultural Revolution," *Washington University*, <https://depts.washington.edu/chinaciv/graph/9wenge.htm>

⁵ "Measuring Religion in China," August 30, 2023, *Pew Research Center*, [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/buddhism/#:~:text="](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/08/30/buddhism/#:~:text=)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Jo Smith Finley, "Islam in China," October 14, 2020, *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0121>



in Xinjiang.⁸ Outside of continuous surveillance, millions of Christians, Muslims, and Buddhists are also being subjected to arbitrary detention, forced labor, torture, and the destruction of religious buildings, books, and artifacts. These forms of persecution are especially pertinent for Uyghur Muslims, as, since 2014, Uyghur Muslims in the Xinjiang region have been subjected to ongoing detention in internment camps, forced labor, forced sterilization, suppression of religious practices, “re-education,” and other serious human rights abuses.⁹ The treatment of the Uyghurs is so severe and targeted that several countries, including the United States, have described the situation as genocide, and the UN has stated that the treatment may amount to crimes against humanity. In all, the Chinese government's approach to religion is complex and has involved both control and suppression of certain religious practices or groups deemed as a challenge to the state's authority. However, the government has come to justify its actions as measures to maintain social stability, combat extremism, and ultimately prevent separatism.

Outside of China, Asian countries' treatment of Muslims greatly varies based on their history and presence within the nation. India, for example, has a diverse population that includes a significant Muslim community. While India is a secular country, there have been instances of religious tensions and occasional violence between religious groups. The rise of Hindu nationalism in recent years has led to concerns among some Muslims about their rights and safety.¹⁰ Myanmar (Burma) is another critical example. Similar to China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims, the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar have faced severe persecution, including violence and displacement. The Myanmar military has been accused of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya population, resulting in a massive refugee crisis as thousands have fled to neighboring countries.¹¹ In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, which have predominantly Muslim populations, Muslims generally practice their faith with fewer restrictions. However, there are still instances of tensions, discrimination, or government policies that affect the Muslim population. It is important to note that the

⁸ “China: Unrelenting Crimes Against Humanity Targeting Uyghurs,” August 31, 2023, *Human Rights Watch*, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/31/china-unrelenting-crimes-against-humanity-targeting-uyghurs>

⁹ Michelle Coleman, “Remedies for Religious Persecution in China: An International Human Rights Perspective,” October 7, 2022, *Caonpy Forum*, <https://canopyforum.org/remedies-for-religious-persecution-in-china-an-international-human-rights-perspective/>

¹⁰ Sushmita Pathak, “A Hindu-Muslim dispute tests centuries of interfaith culture in India Varanasi,” September 16 2023, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/16/1196534905/india-hindu-muslim-mosque-dispute-varanasi>

¹¹ Eleanore Albert, Lindsay Maizland, “The Rohingya Crisis,” January 23, 2020, *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>



treatment of Muslims in any country is diverse and multifaceted. While some countries have been highlighted for reported human rights abuses, others have Muslim populations that practice their faith freely within the bounds of the law. These situations are ultimately influenced by a multitude of socio-political factors within each country.

Current Situation

The CCP's contention and consequent treatment of the Uyghur Muslims is arguably the most severe of all of the religions present within the country. China's efforts to integrate Xinjiang into the rest of the nation, and unite the country under one belief system, have resulted in increased cultural assimilation and restrictions on certain Uyghur religious practices. Additionally, the government has set up forced labor camps in Xinjiang, where officials are blatantly committing human rights abuses and vying to terminate the Uyghur culture. Among these, women have been subjugated to mass sterilization, children have been separated from their families, and many more have been oppressed by mental and physical torture.¹²

The government's issue with Islam is rooted in a myriad of historical, cultural, and political factors. The Chinese government perceives certain expressions of Islam, especially among Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, as a potential source of separatism and extremism. There have been numerous instances of violence and unrest in Xinjiang, which the government attributes to separatist movements led by the Uyghurs.¹³ Moreover, there are inherent cultural and ethnic differences between the Han Chinese majority and ethnic minority groups like the Uyghurs. These differences have contributed to tensions, and thus the government's policies, including restrictions on cultural and religious practices, are seen by some as an attempt to assimilate minorities into the dominant Han culture.

As mentioned earlier, many Uyghur children have been forcefully removed from their families. Specifically, these children are treated as "orphans" by state authorities and placed in full-time boarding schools, pre-schools, or orphanages where the language used is almost exclusively Mandarin. Many UN experts have also been informed of the exponential increase in the number of boarding schools for other Uyghur children in Xinjiang in recent years, and the closure of local schools where

¹² "Read the China Cables Documents," November 24, 2019, *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/read-the-china-cables-documents/>.

¹³ "Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide," May 24, 2022, *British Broadcasting Company*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037>



Uyghur education and history had been taught.¹⁴ This is a continuation of the CCP's efforts to forcibly assimilate Uyghurs into Han culture and truly rid the nation of differing cultures for generations to come.

Relevant Past Action

It is important to recognize that this discriminatory behavior has been occurring under the guise of counterterrorist, anti-extremism measures. However, over the past 7 years, experts in human rights have been urging both China and the UN to recognize the ill treatment of minorities, specifically Uyghurs, in the Xinjiang region as human rights violations.¹⁵ A critical facet of the government's repression of the Uyghur Muslims is detention camps. The Chinese government has reportedly arbitrarily detained more than a million Muslim Uyghurs in these reeducation camps since 2017. These camps, often referred to as "vocational training centers" by the Chinese government, are accused of subjecting detainees to forced labor, indoctrination, torture, and other human rights abuses. The UN Human Rights Office released a report in 2022 based on interviews with dozens of people, including 26 individuals who were detained, that found "patterns of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment" in the camps between 2017 and 2019.¹⁶ As global condemnation of the abuses has grown, Chinese officials and state media have worked to discredit reports on Xinjiang using a range of tactics, including disseminating disinformation and harassing activists. They have repeated a narrative that "anti-China forces" in the United States and other Western countries are spreading "vicious lies."¹⁷

In more recent years, the Chinese government has also forcefully employed countless Uyghur Muslims in highly dangerous and often lethal environments. While in some cases, the forced labor is a result of being detained in the aforementioned detention camps, most of the time, these Uyghur Muslims are taken against their will and placed in harsh factories and manufacturing companies. These work environments have proven to have detrimental effects on the Uyghur population. They have

¹⁴ "China: Xinjiang's forced separations and language policies for Uyghur children carry risk of forced assimilation," September 26, 2023, *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/china-xinjiangs-forced-separations-and-language-policies-uyghur-children#:~:text=>

¹⁵ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1120172>

¹⁶ "China," November 30, 2023, *Global Center for the Responsibility to Protect*, <https://www.globalr2p.org/countries/china/#:~:text=>

¹⁷ Lindsay Maizland, "China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang," September 22, 2022, *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/china-xinjiang-uyghurs-muslims-repression-genocide-human-rights>



effectively limited workers' freedom of movement and communication; and subject workers to constant surveillance, retribution for religious beliefs, exclusion from community and social life, and isolation. Furthermore, reports indicate little pay, mandatory Mandarin lessons, ideological indoctrination, and poor living conditions. In some instances, workers have also been reported to be subject to torture.¹⁸ As a response, the US Senate, under the Trump presidency, passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, imposing sanctions on individuals and entities responsible for human rights abuses against Uyghurs in China. In September 2021, President Joe Biden bolstered the initiative, as he proposed refugee admissions that prioritized the admission of "at-risk Uyghurs".¹⁹ As for Chinese President Xi Jinping, while traveling in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, he affirmed "the outcomes of [China's] Xinjiang policies." He pledged to "consolidate hard-won social stability," ensure that "the public [in Xinjiang] have correct views on ethnicity, history and religion," and "forge a consciousness of a united Chinese nation."²⁰ To further combat forced labor, the United States passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA) in late 2021 as a way to prohibit "the importation of goods into the United States manufactured wholly or in part with forced labor in the People's Republic of China, especially from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, or Xinjiang."²¹ This has encouraged many other countries to take similar actions against China in an effort to ultimately hurt their economy and terminate Uyghur forced labor.

In response to the blatant atrocities and attacks upon the Uyghur Muslims, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights issued a report finding that the Chinese government's violations against Uyghurs in Xinjiang "may constitute crimes against humanity". However, the United Nations Human Rights Council rejected a motion to discuss said report, which was one of just two total instances of a rejected motion, and many cited this as sending a clear message regarding the priorities of the committee.²² Earlier in 2023, the UN high commissioner for human rights, Volker Türk, acknowledged the need for "concrete follow-up" on the report's conclusions. However, he has yet to brief the UN Human Rights Council on the report or on his office's ongoing monitoring of the situation in Xinjiang.²³ Lastly, in October

¹⁸ "Against Their Will: The Situation in Xinjiang," *U.S. Department of Labor*, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/against-their-will-the-situation-in-xinjiang>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/un-body-rejects-historic-debate-chinas-human-rights-record>

²³ Ibid



2023, 51 UN member countries have released a joint declaration denouncing the human rights violations and crimes committed against Uyghurs.²⁴ It is clear that Xi Jinping and the CCP's continual oppression of the Uyghur Muslims remains an effort to self-isolate and unify China and ultimately demands an urgent, active response from the international community.

Questions to Consider

1. How can the international community ensure accountability for the reported human rights abuses against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, China?
 - How does this impact China's allyship (or the lack thereof) with other nations?
2. What international legal instruments exist to address and prevent further repression and widespread human rights violations?
 - What measures are there to protect religious minorities in other areas/nations beyond UN-headed approaches?
3. To what extent does the Responsibility to Protect doctrine apply in the case of the Uyghur Muslims? Should the international community intervene to protect both the future of this population and the doctrine?
4. How can your country utilize the various resources at its disposal to pressure China into cooperating and resolving the suppression of the Uyghur Muslims?
5. How should this committee balance preserving national sovereignty and interfering with human rights violations?

²⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/23/un-member-countries-condemn-chinas-crimes-against-humanity>