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Xinjiang: Let’s Seek Truth From Facts

To introduce myself briefly, I have been visiting China since 1991, with more than 50 visits and a total aggregated time spent in China of over 9 years. In this time my key area of work has been in rural poverty alleviation and community development, targeting the poorer and undeveloped provinces in West China. In this work I have had contact with many Chinese from diverse ethnic groups, and from small holder farmers through to Provincial leaders.

I have travelled extensively in China, including three visits to Xinjiang.

I do not present myself as an academic. Rather, I rely for my facts on my own experience working and travelling in China, from my friends and acquaintances in China, and my extensive studies of China, her policies and her people.

I cannot claim to represent the views of the New Zealand China Friendship Society or its members.

The topic of Xinjiang has become a very hot issue, with many sweeping accusations levelled by “western” media and political commentators, at the way the Chinese government has managed its affairs in the Uyghur Autonomous Region in recent years. China is accused of human rights abuses and cultural genocide, but many counter-arguments are also now emerging from within China and by some international media that are more inclined to balanced reporting.

News reports both misreport and deliberately disreport a range of issues. Much “evidence” given to support these claims lacks credibility, through unbalanced selection of material to prove a theory, unprofessional lack of scrutiny of existing reports, or lies to deliberately mislead. Allegation unsupported by fact has become a disingenuous mode of propaganda, and writers of opinion pieces considered reputable appear content to parrot this misinformation.

It is important that a balance is established to gain a true understanding of the real environment, what is actually happening on the ground, the causes of the problems, how it is being managed, and some outcomes from this process.

Allow me to deconstruct current dialogue on the Xinjiang issue, by presenting some facts and correcting some distortions of the truth.

1. Security Issues in Xijiang. Xinjiang has experienced many hundreds of terrorist attacks from 1990 to 2016. These have been widespread in different cities and counties, and have extended as far afield as an attack in Kunming Train Station and Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Large numbers of people have been killed or seriously injured. These attacks have been indiscriminate, and victims have included men, women and children, Han people and members of other ethnic minority groups, including Uyghur.

Given the interest in Xinjiang from western media, the extent of these incidents has received little coverage, yet when reported to the outside, have been presented not as terrorist attacks, but as 'freedom fighters' from frustrated minority groups. But real freedom fighters do not drive car bombs into crowded market places.

ETIM, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, is behind the attacks, and is closely linked to other international terrorist organisations, including ISIS.

ETIM has been designated a terrorist organisation by the UN, and has a vowed intent to separate Xinjiang from China.

Its recruits come largely from disaffected youth, who have been trained by outsiders, including members of ISIS. A captured training video has proven this link, depicting dreadful content of the training, including how to make bombs, where to detonate with maximum destruction, and graphic depiction of how to execute victims, including beheadings.

In any western country, this would be stamped on severely, yet when it happens in Xinjiang, it appears to be of little interest to the west. Large numbers of these young men, trained to commit acts of terrorism, have been exported to other trouble spots in Afghanistan, Syria and Turkey, thus contributing to global terrorism.

2. In June 2019, twenty-one western countries signed a letter sent to UN Human Rights Commission condemning China's human rights abuses in Xinjiang. This was followed by a letter, eventually signed by 51 countries, stating that security had returned to Xinjiang and the fundamental human rights of people of all ethnic groups there had been safeguarded. This included Saudi Arabia and a number of Moslem countries.

While questioning what Moslem countries have to say about the human rights abuses in Xinjiang, the clear response from the signatories of this letter have been dismissed as pandering to diplomatic debt to China, in defence of China. This can surely not be true of Saudi Arabia, a 'friend of USA', but more importantly a strong voice for the Muslim community.

The letter read: "Faced with the grave challenge of terrorism and extremism, China has undertaken a series of counter-terrorism and deradicalization measures in Xinjiang, including setting up vocational education and training centers," .

In June 2019 the United States, Britain and other western countries objected to a visit by the U.N. counterterrorism chief to Xinjiang, concerned the visit would validate China's argument that it was tackling terrorism.

U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan spoke with U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres ahead of the trip to convey Washington's concerns because "Beijing continues to paint its repressive campaign against Uyghurs and other Muslims as legitimate counterterrorism efforts when it is not."

It seems then that USA consider they can speak for Moslems in Xinjiang, but Saudi Arabia is disregarded, and China's voice should not be heard.

3. Since 2017, there have been no further terrorist attacks in Xinjiang, and the export of terrorists from Xinjiang has also ceased. A number of terrorists have been convicted and imprisoned. China has thus made a contribution to the global campaign to reduce terrorism, yet the western reporting fails to recognise this, preferring to continue to attack China for human rights abuses against Uyghurs.

A UN report states that in 2018, all countries except the USA have reported seeing a decrease in terrorist activity.

4. With respect to the Xinjiang situation, the Chinese government statement on human rights is clear: all citizens have the right to live safely in a secure environment. Those who commit acts of terrorism have no right to freedom.

5. China's research identified poverty, and in particular a poverty of opportunity, as one of the key reasons why disaffected youth have been attracted to terrorist training camps. For many decades the Chinese government has espoused policies to lift their vast rural population people out of poverty all over China. In Xinjiang it is no different.

One policy unique to Xinjiang has been to offer those who have committed minor offences like petty theft, or failure to send children to school, the opportunity to attend vocational training schools instead of punishment. In these, two subjects are compulsory – to learn literacy in both local Uyghur and Chinese languages, and their legal rights and obligations as Chinese citizens under the law.

Thereafter, the trainees can choose from a number of occupational courses leading to employment, which may, for example, include sewing, domestic help, tour guiding and performance in their local culture. There is a stated 80% success rate for graduates to become employed, and many have set up their own businesses.

6. These vocational centres are called “internment camps” by the west, and numbers between one million up to two million have been cited as the numbers interned. The BBC even compared them to Nazi Germany!

But these numbers need closer examination. They come initially from two sources:

a.) a “survey” conducted by the World Uyghur Congress, a group of exiled Uyghurs living outside China. They are linked to the group Chinese Defenders for Democracy, and supported by the US Government funded National Endowment for Democracy. Their figures came from interviews with 8 people in Xinjiang, which were then extrapolated for the whole Xinjiang Autonomous Region. The misinformation on “internment camps” comes from anecdotal evidence through the same source.

b.) The western interpretation of these camps and the numbers in them is reinforced by a German anthropologist, Adrian Zenz. He is a senior fellow in China studies at the far-right Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, which was established by the US government in 1983. He is a far right fundamental Christian, whose avowed objective is to attack the Chinese government with separatist intent in the western border provinces.

Zenz also arrived at his estimate of “over 1 million” in a dubious manner. He based it on a single report by Istiqlal TV, a Uyghur exile media organization based in Turkey, which was republished by Newsweek Japan. Far from being an impartial journalistic organization,

Istiqlal TV advances the separatist cause while playing host to an assortment of extremist figures.

Yet Zenz has been accepted as an authority on Chinese abuse of Uyghur rights without scrutiny by most western media. While Zenz alleges that he is undergoing character assassination, his credibility is unchallenged by western media sources who have failed to present a suitable analyst who does have untarnished credibility.

It does no credit to the critics of China to use speculative and non-credible sources to make claims. The numbers in the education camps, or internment camps, are unproven, nor has what happens in these camps been adequately verified by either side of the argument. From my experience of China's support for minority groups, and my travels in Xinjiang, I am receptive to the Chinese explanation.

7. Western media are very ready to use evidence that is not verified. A satellite photo of a barren walled enclosure in the desert is presented as proof of a "prison camp". A video of shaved headed men being herded onto a train is not verified in a BBC interview when confronting the Chinese Ambassador to Britain. The blue uniform of the prisoners has now been identified as that of a prison in Kashgar/Kashi, and the prisoners as convicted criminals, perhaps convicted terrorists, but this does not prove abuse of the rights of law abiding Uyghurs. In March 2008, in the build-up to the Beijing Olympic Games, CNN posted a photo of the PLA bearing down on a group of Tibetans in Lhasa to present an image of "Chinese oppression of Tibet". It was quickly found to have been cropped to serve this purpose, and CNN had to admit this. Use of unverified photos in Xinjiang follows the same unscrupulous process of deliberate misrepresentation.

8. Many other anecdotal voices from Uyghurs in exile, claiming they have lost contact with relatives, are systematically being checked in Xinjiang. Many are found to be living happily, and the claims discredited. Some have shown the person is imprisoned, while other checks cannot be completed because there is insufficient verifiable details provided by the self-exiled claimants to locate the 'disappeared' individuals. Claims of "desecrated graves" are also discredited, and "mosques destroyed" are shown to have been demolished due to structural safety issues, and immediately rebuilt. The number of mosques in Xinjiang is now one for 530 people.

Of course not all of these anecdotal accusations can be immediately responded to, but there is enough evidence to show that at least a number of the claims are based on false statements, often to the dismay of the family members in Xinjiang implicated in tales of their or their family members' 'disappearance'.

9. The Uyghur population in Xinjiang has increased since 1978 from less than six million to almost twelve million today. This shows a significant increase, and does not support the allegation that the Chinese government is trying to eliminate them. As in all of China, since 1978 there has been a birth control policy restricting Han ethnic group to one birth, and most other groups to two births per family. Some groups like Tibetans were allowed up to four births. Any births over these numbers are punished in various ways, including fines, for all groups including Han, not solely targeting Uyghurs.

10. Throughout the 18 years that I have worked in poverty reduction in China, I have known of the policy of assisting people in poor areas, especially poorer rural areas, to migrate to cities and industrialised areas to find work. While many have chosen urban migration as an

option, others have accepted assistance to move to find employment. This mass movement of people is represented in the rural/urban population balance shifting from around 80:20 to 50:50. This balance is very typical of a developing industrialising country.

This policy has been offered to all Chinese with limited employment opportunity, be they Han or members of the other 55 ethnic minority groups. Some Uyghurs have also accepted this move and migrated to the east. Henan is one Province where there is a substantial population of Uyghurs living and working thousands of kilometres from home.

The claims made by reports from outside China, that the migration of Uyghurs is an insidious form of weakening their ethnic strength, display an abysmal ignorance about Chinese realities, and the huge effort required to bring this vast & ancient nation into the modern world, with livelihoods appropriate to a moderately prosperous society.

Cultural Genocide is another term being used to discredit China's policies in Xinjiang. It was earlier a western tool to dismiss China's attitude to the development of Tibet - the focus of this programme of attack on China has swung towards Xinjiang. Chinese policy has always been to support ethnic minority groups, and has moved to protect the safety and cultural diversity of the twelve groups in Xinjiang, as well as the Han.

11. Human Rights in China have over the last 7 decades addressed the issue of poverty. Here, the three key rights of subsistence: enough food, adequate shelter and provision of education for 1.4 billion people have been noted by Nobel-winning economists as major achievements of the Chinese government. The goal to eliminate extreme poverty by the end of 2020 remains on track, despite Covid-19 and historically large floods this year.

12. The practice of Islam. Islam is the dominant religion of the Uyghur and other ethnic groups in Xinjiang. I will defer to my colleague Sultan Hali for comments, except to pass my observations that Islam is practiced. I have witnessed men at prayer. Uyghurs are allowed to grow beards. The Koran is not banned.

In summary two statements I feel need to be appreciated and respected to receive the truth about Xinjiang. Terrorism and jihad is not part of the Islam religion any more than violence committed by Christian extremist groups is part of Christianity. Eliminating terrorism is an essential duty for any modern government.

The western propaganda against China in Xinjiang needs to be taken for what it is, propaganda. China's defence of policy relating to Xinjiang needs to be better received, and the voice of law-abiding Uyghurs in Xinjiang needs to be at the centre of human rights and development discourse.