Over the past two years, the international community has become increasingly aware of the relentless persecution of the Uyghurs in East Turkistan (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) by the authoritarian Chinese Communist Party. This ancient community has become stigmatised as enemies of the monolithic Chinese state that occupies its homeland. They have been subjected to collective punishment in the form of mass incarceration in concentration camps, aimed at their so-called ‘re-education’. Between one million and three million Uyghurs have disappeared into this dystopian prison estate. The Chinese government claims these institutions are voluntary re-education camps, designed to eradicate extremism among the Muslim population of East Turkistan. The reality is that they are part of a much wider strategy aimed at eliminating the separate ethnocultural identity of the Uyghurs, and effectively wiping them off the map as a separate ethnic group.

In my role as United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Counter-Terrorism, I spent six years examining the various means used by different states to prevent the spread of violent extremism and to counter the appeal of extremist narratives. I examined various programs from Europe to the Middle East, from Sweden to Saudi Arabia. None of them have involved a wholesale attack on an entire community, or the mass incarceration of entirely innocent people solely on the basis of their ethnicity or religion. What is happening in Xinjiang province is not, in any sense, a legitimate counterterrorism strategy. On the contrary, collective punishment of this
kind is, in itself, a fundamental human rights violation on a mass scale. Strategies that inflict deep psychological wounds on an entire community never succeed. They are invariably counter-productive and nurse the very grievances that cause people to turn to extreme ideologies.

The Chinese Communist Party is using counterterrorism as a fig-leaf for cultural genocide. Inside the camps, the regime is regulated by directives that are designed to break the will of those who have been imprisoned. That is the first step in a classic program of brainwashing. The individual’s autonomy is completely eliminated. Every tiny aspect of their daily lives, from where they sit, to when they can speak, is controlled with vicious attention to detail. Any deviation is met with severe forms of punishment. Prisoners are forbidden from using their own language, from practicing their religion, or manifesting their cultural identity in any way. They are held incommunicado, cut off from the outside world, and are only eligible for release after incarceration for months or years. In order to have any chance of being considered for release, they must prove that they have absorbed the official Han Chinese orthodoxy, and have abandoned their independent identity altogether.

The camps are only part of the state apparatus that has been mobilised against the Uyghurs. There have been widespread and credible reports of torture, disappearances, forced sterilisation, and organ harvesting. Traditional Uyghur burial sites and other sites of cultural heritage have been bulldozed and are being built upon as this book goes to press. These are the hallmarks of cultural genocide – a policy that aims at the destruction of the separate identity of a distinct ethnic, cultural, or religious group.

China has, so far, eluded effective international action against it. That is because it is not party to any of the international human rights treaties that would enable other states to enforce the basic rules of human rights and humanitarian law. But there is no doubt whatsoever that the actions of the Chinese authorities amount to crimes against humanity. They constitute a widespread and systematic attack on the civilian population, and they may be pointers towards the commission of the crime of genocide. It is vital
for the international community to take urgent action. A group of mainly western states has recently condemned the persecution of the Uyghurs at the UN level. The US Secretary of State has also taken up the issue on a bilateral level, and efforts are afoot to impose sanctions on Chinese officials through so-called Magnitsky legislation in the US. Other countries with Magnitsky legislation (including the UK) need to follow suit urgently.

Sean Roberts’ account of China’s war on the Uyghurs provides a vital resource for those wishing to understand the background to this human rights atrocity. It traces the history of Uyghur nationalism, and objectively examines the evidence exposing the myths perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party to justify this atrocity in the making. This book should act as a wake-up call for policy-makers worldwide. Armed with the piercing and detailed analysis of the recent past in East Turkistan, and the graphic accounts of the present, no one has any further excuse for failing to grasp the full reality of the human tragedy that is taking place. Roberts de-mystifies the background, debunks the false excuses of the Chinese state, and presents the reality of the persecution unfolding before our eyes. None of us can afford to look away.

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