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Further Evidence of Forced Labour from Xinjiang

New worrying details about the situation in Xinjiang emerged in the first quarter of 2020. On 24 January 2020, state security detained Hui Muslim poet and author Cui Haoxin—also known by his pen name An Ran—in Jinan, Shandong province, accusing him of ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble’. Cui had emerged as a vocal critic of the government’s treatment of Muslim minorities, in particular in Xinjiang. Following two major leaks of official documents in November 2019 by The New York Times and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, in January 2020 new documents detailing the surveillance and incarceration of hundreds of Muslim individuals from the Karakax region in Xinjiang were leaked. The documents describe how individuals charged with arbitrary violations—including praying at home, holding an unused passport, and having more children than permitted by the state—move through the mass detention system, from initial surveillance to internment and ‘graduation’. The release from detention camps, however, appears to be no less horrific. On 1 March 2020, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) released a report on the labour conditions of Uyghur and other ethnic minority individuals who were transferred from Xinjiang to factories across China. Between 2017 and 2019, ASPI estimates that at least 80,000 Uyghurs were relocated from Xinjiang to factories—including suppliers of well-known brands like Apple, Nike, Amazon, Samsung, Zara, H&M, Microsoft, Mercedes-Benz, Uniqlo, and more—where they work ‘under conditions that strongly suggest forced labour’. RZ

(Sources: ASPI; CNN 1; CNN 2; Financial Times; PEN America; Radio Free Asia; Quartz)

Unabated Repression in the Midst of the Coronavirus Crisis

The COVID-19 outbreak of early 2020 did not stop the persecution of activists in China. At the end of December 2019, Pastor Wang Yi—the founder of the Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu, one of the largest underground churches in China—was sentenced to nine years in prison for ‘inciting subversion of state power’ and ‘illegal operation of business’. Roughly at the same time, activist Zhang Baocheng, a former member of the New Citizens Movement arrested in Beijing in July 2019, was charged with ‘promoting terrorism and extremism’. On 26 December 2019, activists Zhang Zhongshun, Li Yingjun, and Dai Zhenya, and human rights lawyer Ding Jiaxi were arrested under the allegation of inciting subversion after joining a gathering in Xiamen. On 15 February 2020, legal academic and founder of the New Citizens Movement Xu Zhiyong was also arrested in Guangzhou for alleged subversion, while his partner Li Qiaochu was taken by the police in Beijing in the early hours of 16 February. On 16 March, the six lawyers of Cheng Yuan, Liu Dazhi, and Wu Gejianxiong—anti-discrimination activists arrested in Changsha in July 2019 for alleged subversion—were ‘dismissed’ by their clients. On 5 April, human rights lawyer Wang Quanzhang, detained since August 2015 for subversion, was released and immediately put under compulsory ‘14-day quarantine’ far away from his family. He was allowed to reunite with them in Beijing only on 27 April. Arbitrary detention not only threatens dissenting voices domestically. In February 2020, Swedish bookseller Gui Minhai was sentenced to ten years on the spurious charge of leaking state secrets abroad, while in April 2020 Canadian citizens Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor marked their 500th day in detention under unsubstantiated spying charges. AC

(Sources: Practice Source; South China Morning Post; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times)
COVID-19 Outbreak

On 16 December 2019, a deliveryman working at the Huanan Seafood Market in Wuhan was admitted to the city’s Central Hospital with pneumonia. Samples were sent to gene sequencing companies, and on 27 December health officials in Wuhan were told that the disease was being caused by a novel SARS-like coronavirus. On 30 December, ophthalmologist Li Wenliang and seven other doctors posted on social media about concerning symptoms in their patients: all were brought in for questioning and reprimanded. The following day, 27 new cases were confirmed and China informed the WHO about the new illness. In early to mid January, the Chinese central government became involved in the response while officially downplaying the seriousness. However, on 19 January Beijing sent its top epidemiologists to Wuhan, and by 23 January the city was put under lockdown, followed by a larger lockdown of the surrounding area the next day. On 6 February, the news that Li Wenliang had passed away due to the virus sparked widespread anger on Chinese social media. The next day several Chinese academics signed open letters demanding freedom of speech. Around this time a number of Chinese activists were also arrested or disappeared. Chen Qiushi, a human rights lawyer who had been reporting on the pandemic, was detained on 6 February. Fang Bin, a Wuhan businessman who had been documenting the crisis, was arrested on 9 February. Li Zehua, a Chinese citizen journalist and rapper, had been posting online videos documenting the situation in Wuhan before going missing on 26 February—he resurfaced only on 22 April. Ren Zhiqiang, an outspoken Chinese tycoon who had dared to circulate an essay critical of the Chinese leadership, disappeared in March and was then placed under investigation for ‘serious violations of discipline and law’. Finally, on 19 April activists Cai Wei, his partner Tang, and Chen Mei were detained by police at an unknown location. They had helped to publish censored articles related to the virus on Github. ZZ

(Sources: Caixin 1; Caixin 2; Hong Kong Free Press; Quartz 1; Quartz 2; South China Morning Post; The Guardian)

Journalists under Assault as China Adopts Enhanced Censorship Rules

On 1 March, a new set of rules from the Cyberspace Administration of China imposed heightened restriction on online publishing, with the aim of encouraging ‘positive’ content while barring material deemed ‘negative’ or ‘improper’. In recent months, the police campaign also expanded its reach overseas. In November 2019, Luo Daiqing, a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota, was sentenced to six months in prison for posting more than ‘40 comments denigrating a national leader’s image and indecent pictures’ while abroad. At the same time, the Chinese government and its proxies stepped up their attempts to control the discussion of China in foreign media. In January, the Chinese Embassy in Copenhagen demanded that the largest newspaper in Denmark, Jyllands-Posten, apologise for publishing an illustration of the Chinese flag depicting viruses replacing the stars. In February, Nepal’s The Kathmandu Post faced similar wrath from the local Chinese Embassy over an image of a Chinese banknote with Mao wearing a mask. At the end of January, leading Swedish newspapers and broadcasters called for action against attacks and threats from Chinese diplomats. Foreign journalists in China have born the brunt of the worsening climate. Following the publication on 3 February of an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal calling China the ‘real sick man of Asia’, three of the paper’s Beijing-based journalists were expelled. The US government retaliated by announcing that the five major Chinese state-run media entities operating in the US would be treated the same as foreign embassies. In mid-March China revoked press credentials for all American journalists working for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post. Chinese nationals employed in China by these outlets were also dismissed. AC

(Sources: Axios; Bloomberg; Committee to Protect Journalists; Cyberspace Administration of China; Nepali Times; Radio Free Asia; The Guardian 1; The Guardian 2; The New York Times; The Wall Street Journal)
Increased Scrutiny of Academia

In the first quarter of 2020, Chinese and US authorities both stepped up their scrutiny of academia, ostensibly to tackle technology theft and espionage. On 28 January 2020, the US Department of Justice arrested Charles Lieber, chair of the Chemistry and Chemical Biology Department at Harvard University. Lieber—along with two Chinese researchers in Boston—was charged with lying about his links to China, in particular in relation to the Thousand Talents Plan, an initiative of the Chinese government aimed at recruiting specialists overseas. On 27 February, Anming Hu, an Associate Professor in the Department of Mechanical, Aerospace, and Biomedical Engineering at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville was arrested under charges of wire fraud and making false statements about his links to China. The DOJ accused Hu of violating federal law by concealing his affiliation with a Chinese university while receiving funding from NASA. Similarly, on 10 March, the DOJ arrested James Patrick Lewis, a former professor at the Physics Department of West Virginia University. Like Lieber, Lewis had entered into a contract with China's Thousand Talents Plan in 2017. He pleaded guilty to a federal fraud charge, admitting that he had convinced his institution to give him leave so that he could serve at the Chinese Academy of Sciences—an appointment which he had not disclosed. Technology theft is not the only worry. Academic freedom was felt to be at stake when, in February 2020, it was disclosed that the Free University of Berlin had signed a 500,000-euro contract with the Chinese Ministry of Education to set up a professorship for a new Chinese-teacher training programme. On the Chinese side, on 26 March, Chinese authorities detained Yuan Keqing, an historian at the Hokkaido University of Education in Japan, as part of a murky espionage investigation. RZ

Renewed Assault on Hong Kong’s Autonomy

The first quarter of 2020 has seen increased efforts by the Chinese Communist Party to curb Hong Kong’s autonomy. On 15 April—China’s ‘National Security Education Day’—Luo Huining, head of the central government’s liaison office in Hong Kong, released a message in which he urged the city to work together to oppose acts that threaten its stability. In particular, he lumped together the challenge posed by the pandemic and the civic unrest, urging the swift adoption of national security legislation. A previous attempt to draft a new national security law in 2003 was abandoned in the wake of mass protests. On 18 April, the Hong Kong police rounded up over a dozen veterans of the opposition camp for their involvement in unauthorised marches last year. Among the arrested were media tycoon Lai Chee-ying, lawyer Martin Lee Chu-ming, and trade union leader Lee Cheuk-yan. At the same time, the Hong Kong government took the unprecedented step of siding with the liaison office over its complaint that the filibustering tactics adopted by opposition lawmakers constituted a malicious breach of their duties. While in a statement released on 18 April the Hong Kong authorities mentioned that article 22 of the Basic Law bars the personnel of the liaison office from interfering in the city’s affairs, in the following hours the statement was replaced by two new statements: one that specified that that the liaison office is authorised by Beijing to have a ‘special responsibility’ in handling issues in Hong Kong, without any mention of Article 22; and another one saying that the liaison office does not even count as an office set up by Beijing in Hong Kong. According to legal scholar Jerome Cohen, such developments represent ‘a stunning advance toward the Chinese Government’s demolition of One Country, Two Systems in fact, if not in name.’ IF

(Sources: AP News; Inside Higher Ed; The Department of Justice 1; The Department of Justice 2; The Department of Justice 3; Reuters; South China Morning Post; Hong Kong Free Press; Jerome Cohen’s Website; Reuters; South China Morning Post; The New York Times)