

HEARTS AND LIVES BROKEN:

THE NIGHTMARE OF UYGHUR FAMILIES SEPARATED BY REPRESSION

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Cover photo: Cover illustration, Children were taken to state-run orphanage and boarding school in Xinjiang where they were subjected to heavy surveillance and were taught songs about "loving your motherland".

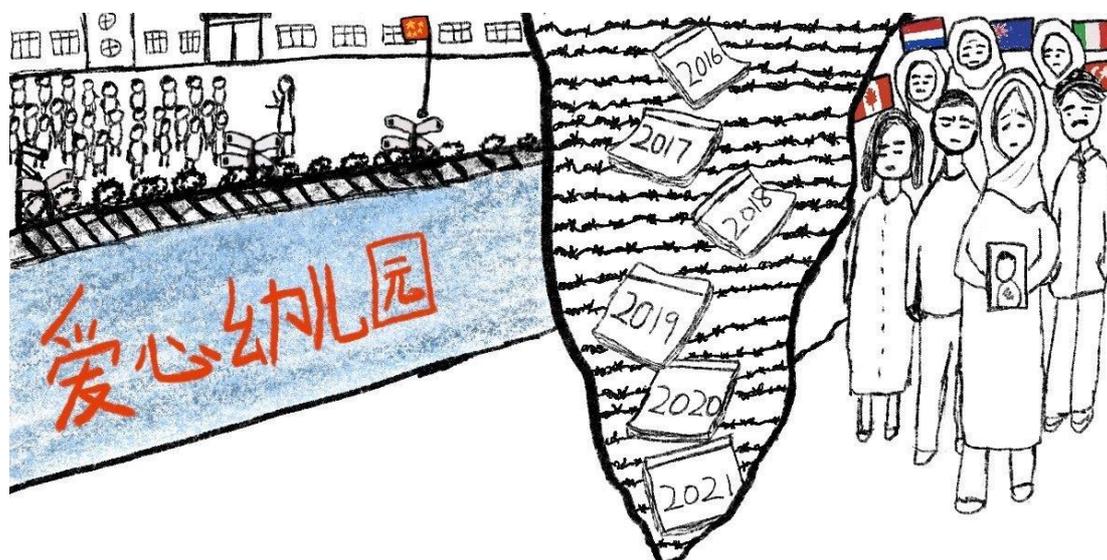
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Nearly four years ago, Uyghur parents studying or making a living abroad began living a recurring nightmare. Many had left one or more children in the care of family members in their hometowns back in northwestern China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang). They could not know at the time that China was about to launch an unprecedented crackdown on ethnic populations in Xinjiang that would have a horrific impact on the lives of what is estimated to be thousands of parents just like them.

For decades, many Uyghurs have experienced systematic ethnic and religious discrimination in Xinjiang. Since 2014, the region has witnessed a greatly expanded police presence and fallen under a heavy blanket of surveillance as part of China's publicly declared "People's War on Terror" and its associated efforts to combat "religious extremism". In 2016, surveillance and social control measures began spreading rapidly. In 2017, things began taking an even more terrible turn for Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim peoples in the region. Since that time, an estimated one million or more people have been arbitrarily detained in "transformation-through-education" or "vocational training" centres in Xinjiang, where they have been subjected to various forms of torture and ill-treatment, including political indoctrination and forced cultural assimilation. This mass detention campaign combined with systematic repression have prevented Uyghur parents from returning to China to take care of their children themselves and made it nearly impossible for their children to leave China to reunite with them abroad.

Many parents thought early on that the crackdown would be temporary and they would soon be able to return home to their children. However, friends and relatives warned they would almost certainly be locked up in internment camps upon returning to China. The existence of the camps and the arbitrary detention of potentially any member of a Muslim ethnic group in them is by now irrefutable. While some contact with their children was possible at first, it ended when the relatives who had been looking after the children were taken to internment camps or jailed themselves. The parents' sojourns overseas were slowly and inexorably turning into exile.

Amnesty International has recently spoken extensively to six parents residing in Australia, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey who have been separated from their children. Their testimonies only begin to scratch the surface of the experiences of Uyghur families yearning for reunification with children trapped in China.

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN?

Although it is often extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Uyghurs overseas to receive information about the whereabouts of their family members, some parents have received bits and pieces of information in the form of coded words, or photos and videos, from relatives and friends that make them believe their children were taken to state-run “orphan camps” or boarding schools.

“Now my children are in the hands of the Chinese government and I am not sure I will be able to meet them again in my lifetime.”

Mihriban Kader

ALMOST REUNITED: FOUR TEENAGERS ON A PERILOUS JOURNEY



Mihriban Kader and Ablikim Memtinin's four children made a 5,000-km-journey from Kashgar to Shanghai.
© Amnesty International

Mihriban Kader and her husband Ablikim Memtinin, originally from Kashgar, fled to exile in Italy in 2016 after being repeatedly harassed by police and told to hand over their passports to the local police station.



 © Mihriban Kader

Soon after they left, the police also started to harass Mihriban's parents, who were taking care of their four children. Eventually, the grandmother was taken to a camp and the grandfather was interrogated for several days and later spent months in hospital.

This left the children without any caretaker. “Our other relatives didn't dare to look after my children after what had happened to my parents,” Mihriban told Amnesty International. “They were afraid that they would be sent to camps, too.”

Fresh hopes for a family reunion came in November 2019, when Mihriban and Ablikim received a permit from the Italian government to bring their children to join them. Before that could happen, however, their four children – aged 12, 14, 15 and 16 – needed to set off by themselves on the gruelling and precarious 5,000-km (3,100-mile) journey from Kashgar, near China's border with Pakistan, to the eastern coastal city of Shanghai to apply for Italian visas in June 2020.

On the road, they faced many great dangers and challenges. Regulations prohibit children from buying train or flight tickets and from travelling on their own in China. Due to discriminatory policies and local government edicts, hotels often refuse to accommodate Uyghur people, claiming there are no rooms available. Despite the adversity, the children persevered and managed to reach Shanghai.

When the children finally reached the gates of the Italian consulate, valid passports in their hands, they could almost feel as if their parents were on the other side waiting to hug them.

Their excitement quickly turned to despair when they were denied entry into the consulate. They were later told family reunification visas could only be issued in the Italian embassy in Beijing, but at that time people could not travel due to the strict lockdown in Beijing in June 2020. With hearts shattered, the children waited outside the consulate, hoping that somebody would come out and help them. Instead, a Chinese guard came over and threatened to call the police if they did not leave.



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Refusing to give in to dejection, the children sought assistance from several travel agencies to apply for Italian visas. On 24 June, all four were seized by the police at their hotel in Shanghai and taken back to an orphanage and boarding school in Kashgar, according to their parents. Had they been permitted to enter the consulate, they might now be reminiscing together with their parents about the daring journey they had just undertaken instead of languishing in the Chinese orphanage system. As it stands, Mihriban and Ablikim fear they might have lost their children forever.

In late 2016, Chinese authorities began systematically confiscating passports from people in Xinjiang. Ordered to surrender their passports to local police stations, many families decided to leave the country while they still could and come back later for children who did not yet have a passport.

Once abroad, parents who made inquiries at Chinese embassies or consulates were provided no information but told only to go back to Xinjiang, where it is highly likely they would be subjected to arbitrary detention and other forms of extralegal punishment.

“I am one of the thousands of Uyghur people whose family has been torn apart ... We haven't heard the voices of our daughters for the last 1,594 days.”

Omer Faruh

SEPARATED FROM MY DAUGHTERS: 1,594 DAYS AND COUNTING

Omer Faruh owns a bookstore in Istanbul. He was in Saudi Arabia in November 2016 when his wife Meryem Faruh called him one night and told him that local police had ordered them to hand over their passports. Worried, Omer asked Meryem not to surrender their passports to the police and immediately bought flight tickets for her and their two elder daughters who already had passports. Two other daughters, aged five and six, had not yet obtained travel documents. Taking into account the large-scale confiscation of passports then taking place in Xinjiang, Meryem and Omer decided that they had no choice but to leave the two younger children in the care of Meryem's parents at home in Korla in central Xinjiang.

Omer soon lost contact with his own parents. In October 2017, he found out from a friend that his parents-in-law had been taken to internment camps.

“I am one of the thousands of Uyghur people whose family has been torn apart ... We haven't heard the voices of our daughters for the last 1,594 days,” Omer told Amnesty International, his voice breaking. “My wife and I cry only at night, trying to hide our sorrow from our other kids here with us.

“I am ready to sacrifice anything for our daughters. I am ready to sacrifice my life if only I knew my daughters would be set free for it.”



Illustration, a Uyghur mother missing her children in her dream.
© Amnesty International

Omer and his family, including all the children, obtained Turkish citizenship in June 2020. He has been trying ever since to enlist the help of the Turkish authorities to bring his two youngest daughters out of China. Although the Turkish embassy in Beijing informed Omer it had initiated the relevant procedures in August 2020 and sent a diplomatic note to the Chinese government in October 2020, to date they have not been able to bring the two girls to Turkey.

“I have something to say to humankind. Please try to put yourself into our shoes, imagine all what we have been going through, and speak out for us,” Omer said.

Some parents wanted their children to spend some time with their grandparents while they were young. Others who were expecting children chose to temporarily relocate outside China to avoid harsh punishments under a restrictive birth-control policy that strips people, particularly women, of their fundamental right to make their own reproductive choices.

“Forgive me, I brought you into the world, but I couldn’t take care of you; I couldn’t be a mum for you”

Rizwangul

TELL ME MY SON IS ALIVE, SAFE AND WELL

Rizwangul was working as a salesperson in Dubai in 2014 when her son, then three years old, accompanied by her cousin Muhammed, visited her for almost half a year. Rizwangul had been planning to bring her son over to live with her permanently, but her parents suggested that he stay in China until he reached school age so that Rizwangul could concentrate on her career. She agreed, thinking that by then she would be comfortably settled in Dubai and could make preparations for his school enrollment.

“Every time I went back to my hometown in Xinjiang for vacation, I used to spend one month with my son. I was incredibly happy then,” Rizwangul told Amnesty International. “When he came to Dubai to visit me, that was the most wonderful time in my life.”

Rizwangul’s cousin, Muhammed, stayed on in Dubai for a job. He returned to Xinjiang in March 2017 when his mother fell sick. Just two months later, as Rizwangul was preparing to return home for a scheduled visit, her sister and friends told her that it was not safe for her to come back to China.

She had no idea the situation was about to turn far bleaker.

When Rizwangul asked her sister about Muhammed, she learned that he had gone to “school” to “study” a week after he arrived back in Xinjiang. Rizwangul understood this to mean that Muhammed had been taken to a “re-education” camp.

Then in September, Rizwangul’s world went dark when her sister – who had been taking care of her son – told her not to call them ever again due to security concerns. Since then, Rizwangul has been unable to contact her son, her sister or friends in Xinjiang.

“It’s really hard for others to understand what I am feeling,” she told Amnesty International, with tears trailing down her cheeks. “The only thing that keeps me moving forward in life is that I want to know that he is alive, safe and well.

“If I could speak to him now, I would say to him, ‘Forgive me, I brought you into the world, but I couldn’t take care of you; I couldn’t be a mum for you’.

“Just imagine that you cannot call your family, you don’t know whether your children, your parents or your relatives are alive or not for years. Imagine it is not only you, but millions of [Uyghur] people separated from their family members. We never thought this would happen to us, but it has happened. Please help us.”



Illustration, children were taken to state-run orphanage and boarding school.
© Amnesty International

It is extremely difficult to estimate the number of children separated from parents who reside outside China, or who remain detained in internment camps or prisons. Documenting the full scope of the violations of human rights in Xinjiang remains extremely difficult, due to a lack of publicly available data and restrictions on access to the region.

“I have no idea what is happening to my children and family. How could this happen? Please, do your best to help us survive this.”

Dilnur

TO RETURN OR NOT TO RETURN?



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Dilnur, who is originally from Kashgar, currently lives with her 11-year-old daughter and studies English in Canada. She left China for Turkey with her daughter in 2016 as they were often severely harassed by the local police, who repeatedly searched her house and ordered her to take off her hijab.

It had taken about a year for authorities to issue passports to her two daughters (her 11-year-old and another daughter aged nine) while the police denied her passport application for her seven-year-old son. When Dilnur asked why, the local police told her it was because they believed she would not come back to China if they issued a passport to him. Because her younger daughter's allergies prevented her from travelling abroad, Dilnur had to leave her and her son behind in the care of her parents. A few months after Dilnur left China, she learned from her family that her younger daughter's passport had been confiscated by the police.

In early 2017, Dilnur faced one of the biggest dilemmas of her life. “You have to come back,” her sister told her over the phone. Their father, who had been taking care of the two children, was being interrogated for long stretches every week. When Dilnur asked why, her sister replied: “Because the government wants you to come back. The safety of our family depends on you. If you do not come back right away, all of our family and even our extended relatives will be punished and taken to camps.”

In the few minutes it took to hear these words, Dilnur's world was torn apart. The thought that the safety of her loved ones hung entirely on her decision whether to return to China or not left her feeling utterly

helpless, since she knew she would be separated from her children and taken to a camp if she ever went back to China.

Dilnur could not sleep for over a week as she struggled over what to do. Then she received a message from her father through a mutual relative, saying that Dilnur should focus on finishing her education. Soon after, another message followed from her father: “Dilnur must never come back again.”

Dilnur believes that her father knew what would happen to her if she went back, so he decided to protect her from potential harm. Moreover, she believed her family and relatives were harassed just because they were Uyghurs and the authorities would not set them free even if she went back.

Since April 2017, Dilnur has been unable to reach any family members. She has no idea what has happened to her two children in Xinjiang. She has tried every possible means but with no luck. “I tried so hard to save my children, but I failed. Once I had this nightmare every night for a week that they were crying out for me. Their teacher then said: ‘Your mother left you.’” Horrified by these thoughts, Dilnur grew afraid of sleep.

Dilnur plans to ask for help from the Canadian government to bring her children over once she is granted permanent residence. While living in Turkey, she had written several letters to seek help from the Turkish Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of the Interior and the Presidency. She has not received any response. Talking to Amnesty International, she also called on the world to act, saying, “I have no idea what is happening to my children and family. How could this happen? Please, do your best to help us survive this. I want to ask everyone to hold on to their humanity, speak for us, stand with us and do not to allow this tragedy to keep happening to our children.”

Uyghurs overseas often hesitate to publicly talk about human rights abuses against them and their relatives due to fear of repercussions for their relatives back in China. In spite of such challenges, these six parents have decided to publicly share their stories in the hope that it will help them reunite with their children soon.

“We did not deserve any of this immense suffering. It’s like you lose four or five years of your life just for being Uyghur or being different from the majority of Chinese”

Mamutjan

“THERE ARE CADRES AT HOME”

Mamutjan, born and raised in Kashgar, currently lives in Australia. He was pursuing a doctoral degree in social science in Malaysia when his wife Muhherrem and baby daughter joined him in 2012, after waiting more than two years for Muhherrem’s passport to be issued.

Mamutjan still cherishes the time they were all together: “When Muhherrem and our daughter first came to Kuala Lumpur, it was so exciting ... Those were the happiest and most memorable times of my life.”

Those happy times lasted almost three years, ending when the Chinese embassy in Kuala Lumpur refused to reissue Muhherrem’s passport in late 2015, after it had been lost. She was then forced to travel back to China to renew her passport with their then five-year-old daughter and six-month-old son. At the time, they thought this would be a routine procedure. They had no inkling that China was about to launch a large-scale crackdown on Uyghurs and that an agonizing, years-long separation was about to begin.

Muhherrem and the two children ended up stranded in Kashgar. Mamutjan was able to maintain regular contact up until the day before Muhherrem was taken to an internment camp in April 2017. When Muhherrem was taken away, the children were left with their grandparents. Not long after, Mamutjan’s parents asked him not to contact them again. Many of his friends and relatives have “unfriended” him on messaging apps.

For two years, Mamutjan knew little about his wife’s whereabouts and was unable to contact his parents or in-laws. In May 2019, Mamutjan saw a video of his son on a relative’s social media account, excitedly shouting: “My mum has graduated!” He then finally found some peace of mind, as he believed this clearly meant she had been released from the camps.

Mamutjan decided to take a chance and called his parents in August 2019. He thought the video might be a sign that his family’s dire situation had improved somewhat.



He was so excited when his mother picked up the phone. “I just wanted to say Eid Mubarak, it’s been so long since the last time I spoke to you,” Mamutjan said.

His mother replied with a quavering voice before she hung up: “There are cadres at home.”

Afterwards, Mamutjan kept calling but the line was always busy. He believes his parents deliberately disconnected the line so that he could not call

again, avoiding contact with him for fear that being in touch with people overseas could lead to internment or other punishment.

Over the last year, Mamutjan has continued to receive bits of information in coded words from his friends that suggest Muhherrem continues to be detained. A friend told him that his wife was “five years old”, which Mamutjan believes might mean that she was sentenced to five years’ imprisonment. Another friend said Muhherrem has been taken to a “hospital”, which could refer to an internment camp or a prison in the coded language Uyghurs use.

While Mamutjan has not been able to contact his family and relatives, he believes his son might be living with his mother-in-law and his daughter with his own parents, based on two videos he received from close friends who visited his hometown to find out more information about his family. “We did not deserve any of this immense suffering. It’s like you lose four or five years of your life just for being Uyghur or being different from the majority of Chinese,” he said.

Mamutjan called on the Chinese government to end its repressive policies in Xinjiang: “If there is any humanity left in them, the Chinese authorities should stop treating people like this and let people reunite with their families. It is not like we have committed any crimes. I want them to realize the extent of this mass cruelty ... This is agonizing and painful injustice, there are no other words to accurately describe this.”

He has reached out to the Department of Home Affairs in Australia, where he is currently living, but they said they could not help him because he is not a permanent resident.

“There is an old saying, ‘Children are heart, children are life.’ It feels like I lost my heart and I lost my life.”

Meripet Metniyaz

A STREAM OF HORRIBLE NEWS

Meripet Metniyaz and her husband Turghun Memet traveled from Xinjiang to Turkey in March 2017 to take care of Meripet’s sick father in Istanbul. Meripet had worked as an ultrasound doctor back in the southwestern Xinjiang city of Hotan, and Turghun had been a businessman investing in real estate and precious stones in Xinjiang. They travelled on one-month visas, thinking they were going to return to China soon. While they were away, Turghun’s mother in Urumqi would look after their four children, aged six, eight, nine and 11.

While nursing Meripet’s father back to health, they started to receive worrying messages from their families that Uyghurs who had previously travelled to Turkey were being detained and taken to internment camps. They decided to postpone their return.

Meripet explained: “We thought we had to be patient and wait for a few months until the situation became better in Urumqi so we could go back. We waited, but the situation only got worse. Not only people who had traveled abroad, but also those who pray and have a beard were getting arrested. We heard many stories about prisons in our homeland and were terrified of going back.”

In late 2017, Turghun found out that his mother and the children had been forced to move from Urumqi around 1,500 km (930 miles) away to Hotan, where she was officially registered as a resident. The tragedy began to unfold further when Turghun learned from his sister Amina that their mother had been taken to a camp shortly after returning to Hotan. Within five days of their return to Hotan, their children were taken to Aixin Kindergarten, a de-facto orphanage.

Meripet took the news extremely hard. “After I lost [contact with] my children, it has hit my mental health.” She often woke up in the middle of the night to nightmares, crying.

“There is an old saying, ‘Children are heart, children are life.’ It feels like I lost my heart and I lost my life.” Bursting into tears, she continued: “The meaning of my life was my children. I always think about their well-being, health and how they are treated.”

Over the following months, Turghun continued to receive pieces of information about the children from his sister in coded text messages. At first, Amina was able to visit the children once a week; a few weeks later, she was no longer allowed access to the children. In June 2018, Turghun suddenly could not even contact Amina anymore.

A few months later, his sister-in-law told him that Amina had been killed during an interrogation while in police custody. Turghun and Meripet were shocked and devastated. Soon after, they found out the same sister-in-law had been taken to an internment camp in late 2018. There was no one left from whom they could seek information about their children.

Meripet and Turghun wrote many letters to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, advisors to the Turkish president and the Chinese embassy in Istanbul. They have yet to receive a response. “My only wish is that every innocent person who has lost their children, parents, relatives and loved ones can live together with them,” Meripet said.



Illustration, children were taken to Aixin Kindergarten, a de-facto orphanage.
© Amnesty International

It is time for China to put an end to its ongoing gross human rights violations and repressive policies in Xinjiang and respect its human rights obligations, including in regard to rights of children under international law. China ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1992. In accordance with Articles 9 and 10 of the CRC, China must **ensure that children are not separated from their parents against their will and that the children's best interests are always the primary consideration** (Article 3). The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has confirmed that if family reunification is not possible in the country of origin, for whatever reason, both the host country and the country of origin should make their best efforts to facilitate reunification elsewhere, with due regard to the human rights of the children and their parents, including the right to leave their own country.

Children who are separated from their parents generally have the right to maintain personal relations and direct contact with them on a regular basis. If the state has taken the child into custody, for example in an orphanage or boarding school, it must provide the parents or other family members with information about the child's whereabouts.

Under the rights to freedom of expression and privacy and family life, all people, including children, must be afforded the opportunity to regularly contact their family members abroad and to seek, receive and impart information, regardless of frontiers.

In October 2016, there were numerous reports that authorities in Xinjiang had confiscated Uyghur passports in an attempt to further curtail their freedom of movement. The right to freedom of movement, including the right to leave one's own country and to obtain the necessary travel documents, may not be limited arbitrarily. The only exception being that it is based on clear legal grounds, necessary and proportionate to achieve a legitimate aim, and consistent with other human rights including the right to non-discrimination.

The parents Amnesty International interviewed reported that Chinese consulates had rejected applications to renew their passports and told them they would need to go back to China in order to do so. A state's refusal to issue a passport or extend its validity based on unnecessary legal rules or administrative measures may amount to a violation of that person's right to freedom of movement.

The Chinese government must uphold its obligations to deal with applications by children or their parents to enter or leave China freely in a positive, humane and expeditious manner, particularly for the purpose of family reunification. Furthermore, the Chinese government must guarantee that there will be no adverse consequences for either parents or children when they request to be reunited with their families. A policy of forcible family separation and especially enforced placement of Uyghur children in orphanages violates the children's rights, including the right to be protected against discrimination and punishment on the basis of their parents' beliefs and deeds.

Pending family reunification, China must respect the rights of members of Uyghur families to maintain direct and regular contact with each other. Amnesty International has documented cases in which contact with relatives overseas is deemed a major reason for arbitrary detention in Xinjiang's internment camps.

In addition, the Chinese government must promptly reveal the whereabouts of the children and other family members of parents abroad, including those who remain detained in internment camps, prisons or other state institutions. Withholding such information could also be an arbitrary interference with the children's right to family life (Article 16 of the CRC).



RECOMMENDATIONS

To the Chinese government:

- Ensure that children are allowed to leave China to be reunited as promptly as possible with their parents, if that is preferred by them, as well as with siblings already living abroad.
- End all measures that impermissibly restrict the rights of Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups to freely leave and return to China.
- Provide full and unrestricted access to UN human rights experts, independent researchers and journalists to Xinjiang to conduct independent investigations about what is happening in the region.
- Close the political “re-education camps” and release detainees immediately, unconditionally and without prejudice.
- Ensure Chinese diplomatic or consular organs and other public officials and authorities protect the legitimate rights and interests of all Chinese citizens, particularly in providing appropriate assistance with locating their family members in China.
- Ensure that everybody from Xinjiang is able to regularly communicate with family members and others without interference, including with those living in other countries, unless specifically justified in line with international human rights law.
- Cease the practice of forced separation of Uyghur children from their parents or guardians, in line with its obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights, unless competent authorities subject to effective judicial review determine that such separation is necessary as a last resort for the best interests of the child;
- Release, as a matter of urgency, all children held in state-run institutions without consent of the child’s parents or guardians.

To second governments:

- Ensure that all Uyghurs, Kazakhs and others have prompt access to a fair and effective asylum process, legal counsel, a thorough assessment of the possible human rights violations or abuses they might face upon return and the ability to challenge any removal orders;
- Make best efforts to ensure that all Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other members of Chinese ethnic groups resident in their countries, regardless of their immigration status, are provided with consular and other appropriate assistance to establish the whereabouts of and contact with their children, keeping in mind the special circumstances in which members of these ethnic groups find themselves presently;
- Make decisions about family reunification with due regard to applicable human rights obligations, in particular under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, by dealing with applications by a child or his or her parents to enter their country for the purpose of family reunification in a positive, humane and expeditious manner.

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CONTACT US



info@amnesty.org



+44 (0)20 7413 5500

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HEARTS AND LIVES BROKEN:

THE NIGHTMARE OF UYGHUR FAMILIES SEPARATED BY REPRESSION

Nearly four years ago, Uyghur parents studying or making a living abroad began living a recurring nightmare. Many had left one or more children in the care of family members in their hometowns back in northwestern China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang). They could not know at the time that China was about to launch an unprecedented crackdown on ethnic populations in Xinjiang that would have a horrific impact on the lives of what is estimated to be thousands of parents just like them.

Amnesty International has recently spoken extensively to six parents residing in Australia, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey who have been separated from their children. Their testimonies only begin to scratch the surface of the experiences of Uyghur families yearning for reunification with children trapped in China.