

# Weaponized Passports: the Crisis of Uyghur Statelessness



- The Chinese government has long weaponized access to passports through corruption, confiscations, and discriminatory procedures. Control is now exerted through effectively denying Uyghurs the right to a passport.
- Chinese embassy officials tell Uyghurs that the only way to renew a passport is to return to China. Those Uyghurs who have returned to China have disappeared. Lack of documentation impacts the livelihoods, marriages, living situations, studies, and freedom of movement of Uyghurs abroad.
- UHRP recommends that states recognize the deprivation of passports as a violation of Uyghur rights, and understand the danger that returning to China presents to Uyghurs. States should ensure that Uyghurs have access to Convention Travel Documents, and are granted asylee status in a timely manner.
- States which host Uyghur populations should ensure that they are granted legal status and documentation, and access to public services such as schools.

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## SUMMARY

A crisis of statelessness is looming among Uyghurs overseas. The Chinese government is denying Uyghurs the renewal of their expiring passports at diplomatic missions. Chinese embassy officials tell Uyghurs that the only way to renew a passport is to return to China. Those Uyghurs who have returned to China have disappeared. Those who have not returned due to the fear of disappearing are denied legal status abroad, which has a direct impact on their livelihoods, freedom of movement, and capacity to start new lives outside of China. This report documents interviews with Uyghurs in Turkey and the United States who are experiencing this problem. It also documents the extensive reporting on the issue, illustrating the global scale of the statelessness crisis.

The Chinese government has long weaponized access to passports as a means of control. Previously, this control was exercised through corruption, confiscations, and discriminatory procedures. Control is now exerted through effectively denying Uyghurs the right to a passport. The Chinese government's offer of one-way travel documents to China to make passport renewal applications is disingenuous. Uyghurs understandably do not want to return given the real possibility of detention, especially because any overseas connection is enough to land a Uyghur in an ethno-religious internment camp.

Possession of documents such as a passport is easily taken for granted. For the Uyghurs in this report, their lack of documentation impacts their livelihoods, marriages, living situations, studies, and freedom of movement. In other words, the denial of a passport is also the denial of a dignified life. As a result, Uyghurs are pushed to the fringes of societies in order to survive. The Uyghurs UHRP spoke to for this report said they do not want to resort to using predatory passport agents or to breaking the law; they merely want to live securely and get on with building new lives. As one Uyghur told UHRP, an overseas passport is the green light for a new life among many Uyghurs.<sup>1</sup>

In interviews Uyghurs also expressed the psychological pressure of living without documents, as well as the trauma of news from East Turkistan about loved ones taken into camps or harshly sentenced. The fear of deportation and frequent separation from spouses, children, and parents in East Turkistan were recurring themes. Interviewees were mostly reluctant to criticize local authorities in places such as Turkey, blaming the Chinese government for their problems. Not only are Uyghurs overseas, especially young students, cut off from support, they are also harassed for personal details and threatened to return to their hometowns by police in China.

Uyghurs are used to restrictions on their freedom of movement in China. They are subjected to racialized checkpoints across their homeland,<sup>2</sup> and during the tenure of Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian they were forced to carry the *bianmin* card, a type of internal passport aimed at curbing Uyghurs' ability to travel freely. Uyghurs called the card the “‘yeshil kart[a],’ or ‘green card’, because it made them feel like immigrants in their own country.”<sup>3</sup> However, the denial of passports to overseas Uyghurs represents an attempt to control free movement abroad. Such targeted policies remind Uyghurs that even if they

live outside of China's borders, the Chinese state retains control over their bodies. As a result, some Uyghurs are resorting to the use of fake documents.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that “[e]veryone shall be free to leave any country, including his own,”<sup>4</sup> as does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>5</sup> Uyghurs who are denied passports cannot leave any country, however, and their return to China would present a clear danger. The Chinese government's refusal to issue and renew Uyghurs' passports amounts to a violation of their right to leave, and in countries where Uyghurs are not able to apply for refugee status, effectively renders them stateless. A Communication issued by the Human Rights Committee in 2004 stated that “[p]assports are the sine qua non of the right to leave.”<sup>6</sup> Refusal to issue a passport amounts to a violation of this right as established in international law.

Article 4 of Chinese passport law states that “embassies or consulates of the People's Republic of China, or other missions overseas authorized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” are among the entities that have permission to issue passports, meaning that the Chinese government's requirement that Uyghurs return to the P.R.C. to renew their travel documents is not universally applied to all P.R.C. citizens.<sup>7</sup> Article 11 states that P.R.C. citizens may apply for renewal in person at an embassy or consulate. Article 13 states officials can refuse to issue passports to people involved in fraudulent and criminal behavior, as well as those “who the relevant competent department of the State Council believes will undermine national security or cause major losses to the interests of the State.” The vague wording of this law fails to meet international standards of respect for human rights in national security. Chinese government policies inside and outside of China clearly demonstrate that they regard all Uyghurs as a threat to national security on the basis of their ethnicity. A document leaked in late 2019 shows that even simply applying for a passport and not going abroad is a major reason for extra-judicial detention of Uyghurs, which has no basis in Chinese law and is clearly racially targeted.<sup>8</sup>

Academics Nisha Kapoor and Kasia Narkowicz illustrate how citizenship and its markers, such as passports, have become instruments of state control. They write: “Citizenship, it seems, is being formally institutionalized as a privilege, not a right. Even as its premise as a universal entitlement has always been subject to numerous limitations and qualifications based on raced, classed, gendered and sexualized exclusions, of late it appears that in the name of national and global security greater conditions are to be placed on this nominal right, such that citizenship itself becomes a disciplinary device...states have made moves to tie citizenship rights to conduct and behaviour emphasizing its provisional nature and invoking citizenship deprivation as the ultimate punitive measure with which to sanction unruly subjects.”<sup>9</sup>

In 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) launched a campaign to end statelessness by 2024, accompanied by the hashtag #IBelong, that focused on the refugees of conflict.<sup>10</sup> The cases in this report illustrate that this worthy initiative has a blind spot, in that it does not address instances in which governments move to render individuals stateless through denying access to legal documents when no open conflict is in progress. The UNHCR's lack of engagement on this issue with

Chinese counterparts means its campaign to end statelessness is not fully formed. To highlight this gap, Halmurat Uyghur, an activist in Finland, started the #WhereDoUyghursBelong hashtag. Agencies such as UNHCR should act now, as the problem of statelessness among China's 'undesirables' is set to expand beyond the Uyghur community to Tibetans<sup>11</sup> and dissident Chinese.<sup>12</sup>



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Stateless Uyghurs say they feel trapped in the system without passports and worried they could be sent back. [#WhereDoUyghursBelong](#) is a new campaign by [@HalmuratU](#) to bring attention to their plight and pressure countries to help.



*Uyghur Aid and Uyghur Academy press conference in Istanbul to launch the #WhereDoUyghursBelong hashtag, July 24, 2019.<sup>13</sup>*

UHRP recommends that states recognize the deprivation of passports as a violation of Uyghur rights, and understand the danger that returning to China presents to Uyghurs. States should ensure that Uyghurs have access to Convention Travel Documents, and are granted asylee status in a timely manner. States which host Uyghur populations should ensure that they are granted legal status and documentation, and access to public services such as schools.

## DENYING PASSPORTS TO UYGHURS: A GLOBAL PROBLEM

### (1) Interviews with Uyghurs in Turkey

(a) *“Abdugheni’s” Story: Passport Agents in Turkey- “They have a good relationship with the Chinese consulate.”*

“My passport expired on June 29, 2019. I applied for an extension one month before the expiration, and I haven’t heard back. There are some agencies in Turkey that help process Chinese passports. They told me if I went to the consulate and applied six months in advance, Chinese officials would cut up my passport. They told me the best strategy is to wait until the last minute.

The agencies are generally run by Uyghurs who are Turkish citizens. They have a good relationship with the Chinese consulate. Some Uyghurs in Turkey do not trust them and think they are spies. There are agents in Istanbul and Ankara, and Turks use them for visa applications when they travel to China. The consulate charges USD 25 for a passport, and the agency process is between USD 500 to 1,000 depending on the application.

I haven’t gotten my passport, but I was offered a one-way travel document to China valid for two years. I want a passport; however, the travel document would be useful to have to show Turkish authorities some paperwork. I cannot go to China as I’ll face prison or death. To apply, I needed to submit my expiring passport, an identity card, fingerprints, photographs, and proof of status in Turkey. I applied online and was given a number. The number can be used to check the status of the application. What the agency does is follow up because the Chinese consulate’s attitude is better with them. Chinese staff work through relations. I had friends who went by themselves to the consulate to renew their passports, but their passports were cut up. I know my chances are small, but I think going through an agency will help me.

I arrived in Turkey in 2013 on a tourist visa and then applied for permanent resident status two and a half years ago. I haven’t heard back about that either. I got the tourist visa in Malaysia. My recently expired passport was issued in 2009 in East Turkistan. I worked in an import and export company with business in Central Asia, so I needed one. When I got the passport, I had to use connections to get it. My hukou is in Hotan, and even the Uyghur officials there said it was going to be difficult. I took a lot of Han officials to banquets and gave them gifts. Usually the passport would have cost CNY 150 (USD 20) for one, but my brother and I spent about CNY 30,000 (USD 4,200) in bribes to get two passports, and it took one and a half years to get them. We also had to get stamps from ten offices.

If we cannot get residence in Turkey, I think I will apply to UNHCR as a stateless refugee; however, if I get all my papers approved, I’ll start a company here. Without the proper papers, I’ll have no livelihood, my children cannot attend school, and I cannot even get a driver’s license. My wife makes bedding at home and I sell it in the bazaar as a street vendor. That’s how we are getting by. Uyghurs without papers like me are in the

bazaar selling goods. We rent stalls daily and no one asks any questions. There are about 300 Uyghurs doing this kind of business.

Without documents we can't do anything, and we fear deportation to China. We work hard but cannot make any progress. A valid document makes all the difference. I think China wants us Uyghurs to return. They are showing their power over us. They can bring me back. They are trying to scare everyone.”<sup>14</sup>

***(b) “Ablet’s” Story: Changing Policies on Issuing Passports and Documents – “It wasn’t easy to renew passports ten years ago in Turkey, but now it’s impossible.”***

“My Chinese passport is going to expire in June 2020. I got my first passport in China in 2005, then I renewed it for ten years in January 2010. Beginning in 2008 you could renew your passport for ten years. It wasn’t easy to renew passports in Turkey ten years ago, but now it’s impossible.

In 2010, I applied in person for an extension with two months to go before my passport expired. I had to provide my student identification in Turkey, my criminal record, as well as the name, address, and workplaces of my parents. I couldn’t go to China to get some of the documents they requested, so my relatives helped. They had to bribe Chinese officials to get them, about CNY 20,000 (USD 2,800), but they got them, and I could renew my passport. I paid a normal fee for the passport at the consulate, which was approximately USD 50.

To renew my current passport, I’ll need my student identification and my parent’s telephone number, address, and workplaces, as well as a letter of authorization from my hometown. It is impossible to get such a document from my hometown. I dare not contact anyone in East Turkistan to help me get it lest I put them in danger.

In 2012, I got married in East Turkistan and then I wanted to divorce my Uyghur wife. However, the Chinese consulate will not issue a divorce certificate, so neither my ex-wife nor I can remarry. We cannot get on with our lives, and we are still officially married. Neither of us wants to go back to China to get the document out of fear we will never come back. I don’t know what to do, and my future is dark.

I am among thousands of Uyghurs who cannot renew their passports, and like them I cannot make plans. I cannot enroll in the PhD course I want to do, I cannot work, and I cannot travel overseas. I thought about using an agent, but it is too expensive. Some have asked for as much as USD 5,000. I’ve no choice but to think of an illegal escape. I do not want to commit a crime, but there are few options.”<sup>15</sup>

***(c) “Abdulghopur’s” Story: Forcing Uyghurs to Return to China through Denial of Passport Renewals- “I don’t want a travel document. I want a passport.”***

“My Chinese passport expired on May 31, 2019. I got my passport in inner China in 2009. I had a *hukou* from an inland city, so there was no problem getting it. I got it through the

regular process. The government then stopped Uyghurs with inner China *hukous* from getting passports outside of East Turkistan. I was lucky.

I arrived in Turkey in 2014 and went back to my hometown in summers 2015 and 2016. On one of those occasions, I was questioned, and my passport was confiscated, but I got it back because I used some connections I had with the police. I came to Turkey to study. I have a residence permit, and I have nearly finished my master's degree. Even though I have a permit, I don't have the same rights as citizens of Turkey. For example, my freedom of movement is not so easy. If I leave Ankara, the police question me a lot. Not having a passport is starting to cause me trouble, as I need one to enroll in a PhD and I cannot take an IELTS examination.

In mid-May, I made an appointment with an official and went to the Chinese consulate in person to supply all the documents they requested for a renewal, such as a copy of my residence permit, my expiring passport, student identification, and so on. During the appointment, I had to write a letter about how I got to Turkey, what I have been doing here, and about my parents. They gave me a case number and told me to deposit USD 25 in a bank account and wait for them to get in contact. I was told they will issue it if the local authorities in my hometown approve it.

After two months I called, and the consulate staff said the authorities in my hometown had not responded. They offered to give me a travel document to go to China and organize the permission in person. The travel document would expire in about two to three years. I refused. I don't want a travel document. I want a passport.

If I had the passport, I could continue my education or even start a business. I've decided not to use an agent. All they do is take your money and you end up with a travel document anyway. Even those agents with good relations at the consulate can't help. The reason we can't get passports is because we are Uyghurs. I think they are purposefully making us angry. In 2016, my parents came to Turkey for one month. Then in 2017, they disappeared into a camp, probably because they came to see me. I have ten other relatives in camps."<sup>16</sup>

***(d) "Ablimit's" Story: Living without Documents – "I don't know what is going to happen in the next two minutes."***

"I haven't had a passport for as long as I can remember. I escaped from China without legal documents in 2014. For me to get a passport is impossible.

I was arrested in 1997, on the eve of the Hong Kong handover, while I was studying at Kashgar Teachers College. The police arrested two hundred other Uyghurs. Without a trial, I was handed a three-year jail sentence just like that. I was convicted of organizing an illegal group and of 'splittism.' We used to pray, so I was also convicted of participating in illegal religious activities. I was tortured in jail. My jailers pulled my nails out.

I was released in 2000 and in no position to apply for a passport. I was blacklisted. Up until 2013, I had to report to the police every day about my activities and meetings. In 2013, I started to think about escaping. I had no freedom. I lived in Peyziwat, and there was no law and order there. When I went to the police, they sometimes beat me for no reason.

I learned I could get to Turkey through Southeast Asia. In August 2013, I went to Ürümqi and then onto Kunming, where I spent one week. I paid USD 1,000 to get from Xishuangbanna to Laos. There were no checks, even at the border. It took 20 days to get from Laos to Thailand via Burma, and then I went on to Malaysia. I stayed there until July 2014. While in Malaysia I bought a fake Turkish passport, which cost me about USD 14,000. The human smugglers were Chinese, and they had good relationships with the police along the entire journey.

In July 28, 2014, I got a letter from the Malaysian government telling me I had to leave in one week. We were a group of 80 who traveled to Turkey. The Turks gave me a 15-day ‘visa’ when I arrived and told all of us to apply for a residence permit. It turned out I didn’t need the passport. I got a two-year permit in August 2014. We were welcomed. The good treatment lasted until mid-2016. I couldn’t get a renewal on my permit and increasingly I was unable to do anything. I cannot even get a telephone calling card.

Eventually, I was given a deportation order. In August 2018, a Turkish court rescinded it, and I applied for residence again. It was denied. In February 2019, the Turkish police arrested me, and the deportation order was reinstated. I was sent to a deportation center. With the help of a lawyer I was released in April 2019. I have to report to the police every week, and I have no status, with the deportation order still hanging over me.

I can’t take a bus or train because the police might check me for papers and arrest me. I have to be careful, and I move through side streets. The pressure in Turkey is only made worse by the news about my family from China. In October 2015, the Chinese police arrested my wife—I still don’t know why—and gave her a seven-year jail sentence. I heard that in 2016 my father and brother were also arrested. I have five children. I don’t know much about what has happened to them. I know one of my daughters is in one of the state-run orphanages. In 2016, a Uyghur married to a Saudi citizen contacted me and told me one of my children was killed in a car accident. I have no idea about the truth of this information and which child was involved. I’ve lost contact with everyone in China.

When Zinnetgul was deported, it put fear into me and throughout the Uyghur community. I don’t know what will become of me. I don’t know what is going to happen in the next two minutes.”<sup>17</sup>

### ***(e) Uyghurs in Turkey Speak to the Media***

Since August 2018, several Uyghurs based in Turkey have related their passport difficulties to the international media. On August 31, the *Wall Street Journal* reported how one individual, Memet, had recently applied for a passport on behalf of his newborn

son only to be given a travel document instead. In 2015, Memet's elder son received a passport without obstacles.<sup>18</sup> In October, the *New York Times* succinctly described the problem: "Many Uyghurs are traveling on Chinese passports, and growing numbers of those passports will expire in the coming years, forcing some Uyghurs to choose between returning to China or, in effect, living as stateless exiles."<sup>19</sup> As one Uyghur, a student named 'Guli,' told the *New York Times*: "If we have a child, my child cannot get Chinese citizenship, because China refuses to give a passport, and Turkey is not going to give me passports."<sup>20</sup>

The policy of issuing one-way travel documents to Uyghurs was confirmed by *Reuters* in an interview with Munevver Ozuygur, President of the East Turkistan Nuzugum Culture and Family Foundation.<sup>21</sup> The continuing problem with Uyghurs being denied passport renewals only to be handed a travel document was noted in a July 2019 article in the *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*. The article detailed a further issue compounding the documentation problem faced by Uyghurs: the fact that "[i]t is unclear whether Turkey will continue issuing Turkish citizenship and passports to this diaspora Uyghur population."<sup>22</sup> Given the reluctance of Uyghurs to return to China, they are effectively rendered stateless.

According to recent reports of potential deportations and detentions at immigration checks, it appears that Turkish authorities are taking a tougher approach to Uyghurs in Turkey. In September 2018, immigration officers in Istanbul detained Rushengul Tashmuhemmet and her son at Ataturk Airport after they had taken a flight from Almaty, Kazakhstan. At the time the incident went public, she had not been informed of the reason for her detention and was only told there was a problem with her passport.<sup>23</sup> In 2019, reports emerged of Uyghurs detained in deportation centers, including a family of four, among them Zinnetgul Tursun, her husband, and their two children. Although the family members were legal residents of Turkey, they were declared Tajik citizens, and Zinnetgul and the two children were sent to Tajikistan in June. Chinese police subsequently detained them in Dushanbe International Airport, after which they were taken to Ürümqi.<sup>24</sup> The *Financial Times* reported that in addition to Zinnetgul and her children, eyewitnesses saw at least six other Uyghurs handed over to Chinese officials at the airport.<sup>25</sup>

Anecdotal reports indicate that approximately 3,000 Uyghurs in Turkey, including students whose passports have already expired, received resident permits in October 2019. Furthermore, Uyghur children without passports have been permitted to attend schools. However, the use of Chinese naming customs in P.R.C. passports has created problems for Uyghurs in Turkey and elsewhere. Chinese names are written first with the family name, then the given name. In Uyghur tradition, given names appear first and patronyms (the given name of the individual's father, which they use in place of a family name) second. One Uyghur man who spoke to UHRP took four children to the local education office in an undisclosed Turkish city to register them. The office would not process the application because the father's patronym did not match the children's patronym as written in their P.R.C. passports.



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Recently some #Uyghurs have received official notices from #Turkish migration about they will be return to their country of origin. Here are a case of its kind, please share this, they will be end up in a #ConcentrationCamp or sentence for long term prison.



*UyghurAid publicizes Abdugheni Ablet’s potential deportation despite his permanent residency status in Turkey, July 20, 2019.<sup>26</sup>*

Uyghurs in Turkey speaking in August 2019 told the *Financial Times*: “Hundreds of Uyghurs are being held in Turkish refoulement centres and 40 others have lost their residency in recent months.”<sup>27</sup> Suleyman Soylu, Turkey’s interior minister, claimed Turkey does not send individuals back to China if they face persecution; however, he did not disclose how this status is determined. Mr. Solyu added that Turkey had granted 11,000 Uyghurs long-term residence in the country.<sup>28</sup> However, fears of deportation among Turkey’s Uyghur community were confirmed when Abdugheni Ablet was handed an order to leave in July 2019 after his application for residency was denied. Despite an assurance from the Turkish authorities that the order would not be carried out, Abdugheni feared China’s overseas influence could change his situation.<sup>29</sup>

## **(2) United States of America**

Tahir Hamut, a prominent contemporary Uyghur poet now resident in northern Virginia, spoke to UHRP about the August 2019 expiration of his two daughters' passports. At the time of the interview, Tahir and his family were in the process of applying for political asylum. He told UHRP "our major stress is if our petition for political asylum fails, then we would not have legal documents in any country. The situation is awful. With nowhere to go we would be illegal immigrants." Tahir added: "With passports we would not have any of this trouble. My children would be legal residents of the United States and free to travel overseas. Although we should go the Chinese Embassy to renew our passports, we cannot. There is no option other than apply for asylum."<sup>30</sup>

In interviews with *Time*, other Uyghurs discussed the dilemmas facing the community in the United States. UHRP Board Chair Nury Turkel described the emotional hardship of being cut off from relatives in East Turkistan either through fear of putting loved ones in danger with a phone call or because their family members are already in detention. However, Turkel explained that the loss of contact also had practical impacts for students in the United States who cannot pay tuition fees because their parents have been taken. In response to the Chinese Embassy's refusal to renew passports without requiring Uyghurs to return to China, Turkel said: "It's not hard to imagine what will happen to that individual when they go back to China with a one-way ticket."<sup>31</sup>

Shohret Gheni, a Uyghur student in Illinois, told *Time* that as he searched for information on his parents, missing since 2017, he received automated call from the Chinese consulate in Chicago to come meet officials there to pick up an 'important document.' If he did not, his immigration status in the United States would be under threat. Shohret said he did not go to the consulate as he feared the officials would confiscate his passport: "[t]hey know my address, they know my phone number. They know everything." Shohret's account illustrates the fear faced by Uyghurs in entering Chinese diplomatic buildings given the vulnerability felt inside the facilities. The requirement that Uyghurs make a passport application under such conditions is a deterrent to their ability to obtain legal documents.<sup>32</sup>

## **(3) Other Countries**

The scope of China's passport renewal denials extends beyond Turkey. Media reports demonstrate that the problem is worldwide and that the policy is not restricted to certain key states or the capriciousness of local diplomatic missions. Instead, the denial of passport renewals appears to be a policy aimed at all Uyghurs outside of China. The specific targeting of Uyghurs also indicates that Chinese laws introduced on January 1, 2019 to "better meet the needs of passport applications for overseas Chinese" applies only to certain categories of its citizens.<sup>33</sup> The following accounts from the international media cover a wide geographic area; however, they describe similar issues as those documented in Turkey. These reports are illustrative, not exhaustive, and UHRP believes that, just as in Turkey, the number of Uyghurs with unrenovable expiring passports is far greater than reported.

### ***(a) Australia***

In an August 2018 article, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the 71-year-old mother of Aynur Ashimajy, an Australian citizen, had been denied renewal of her passport at the Chinese consulate in Sydney. Chinese officials issued Ayshegul Saidi with a travel document valid for one trip to China. However, fearing she would not be allowed to return to Australia, she stayed in Australia without valid documents.<sup>34</sup>

In a message to UHRP about the passport expiration problem, a Uyghur-Australian wrote about the safety in having an Australian passport and how possession of Chinese travel documents left Uyghurs vulnerable: “Whenever I hear these stories, my heart aches. It reminds me of my brother. When he was in Kazakhstan in 1999, the Chinese government issued arrest warrants because of his role in the Ghulja protests. The UN brought him to Australia through an emergency process. If they hadn’t, the Kazakhs would have deported him. When he got his Australian passport, he couldn’t believe that he had one. He kept his passport in his chest pocket day and night for a month, even though he did not have to travel. Whenever he looked at his passport, he would say ‘now I’m an Australian, no one can deport me back to China.’”<sup>35</sup>

### ***(b) Canada***

In interviews with Uyghurs in Canada, the *Ottawa Citizen* spoke to students who described how they are unable to return to East Turkistan. The students feared detention in an internment camp upon return; however, the expiration of their visas and passports mean they risk breaking Canadian law if they overstay. The article notes: “The Canadian government has accepted some Uyghurs as refugees, but has not made any guarantee against deporting them like some other countries have.” Some of the Uyghurs with soon-to-expire passports told the *Ottawa Citizen* of their unsuccessful attempts to renew passports and how Chinese consulates across Canada had handed them a “one-way travel document” to China.<sup>36</sup>

### ***(c) Kazakhstan***

Kazakhstan has a record of forcibly deporting Uyghurs to China at the behest of Beijing. In a 2016 report, the World Uyghur Congress recorded eight incidents of enforced deportations of Uyghurs stretching back to 1998.<sup>37</sup> The close economic ties with China and an established security arrangement with the Chinese military through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization make Kazakhstan a perilous country to seek refuge.

Since the policy of denying passport renewals has been in place, *Radio Free Asia* reported on Muyesser, the wife of a Kazakh citizen, whose case illustrates the dangers of going back to China to secure a new passport. Muyesser returned to China in August 2017 to renew her passport at the request of the Kazakh authorities. Across the border, Chinese officials confiscated her passport and did not give her a new one. Three months later, she was detained in China.<sup>38</sup> Further cases of this type are documented in the Xinjiang Victims Database, including that of Zhiger Toqai, who “went back to China

during the summer break of 2017, both for health reasons and to obtain a new passport. The passport was not issued, making it impossible for him to return and finish his degree. In June 2017, he was arrested and sent to camp.”<sup>39</sup>

Possession of a Kazakh passport is not a guarantee of safety in China. One individual named Gulbahar Jelil was informed that her Kazakh citizenship was immaterial, and Chinese officials took “her Kazakhstani passport away and replaced it with what looked like an official Chinese ID card that had her image. They said it proved she was a Uyghur from Xinjiang. They forced her to memorize her new ID number. They told her to confess her crimes.”<sup>40</sup>

#### ***(d) Russia***

In September 2018, *Radio Free Asia* spoke to two Uyghur businessmen, Nebi Hajim and Nur Muhammet, of the passport issues facing Uyghurs conducting trade in Russia and Central Asia. Nebi Hajim told *RFA*: “Currently we are unable to renew our passports, and the [Uyghur businessmen] in Central Asia are also facing the same situation. Many people’s passports have expired because the Chinese Embassy refused to renew them. [Chinese authorities] are asking people to return to the country. But if we choose to return home, we will be locked up in a prison straightaway and left to rot there.”<sup>41</sup>

Hajim went on to say: “All those who returned were arrested on arrival and taken to re-education camps or prison. There was a man named Memet Hajim who went back and was arrested at the airport on arrival. He also had a young cousin, his brother’s son, who was 19 or 20 years old. He went back in January this year and was also taken away straight from the airport on landing. . . . This is a common scenario at the moment.”<sup>42</sup>

The interview also disclosed how the community of Uyghur businesspeople in Moscow had declined from roughly 30 to 40 individuals to about 10. Furthermore, the ability to conduct business was severely curtailed, impacting their livelihoods. Nebi Hajim added: “Those whose passports have expired must hide them and tell the police lies when being approached and checked—it is impossible to travel because of the risk. That is how we manage each day. We Uyghurs are in a very vulnerable situation.”<sup>43</sup> Confirming the policy of denial of passport renewal, Nur Muhammet described how “[a]lmost everybody’s passports have expired, but when they go to the Chinese Embassy for an extension, they are refused and told they must return to China to ‘sort things out.’ In other words, we must return so they can incarcerate us.”<sup>44</sup>

#### ***(e) Pakistan***

There have been ten documented forced deportations of Uyghurs from Pakistan since 1997.<sup>45</sup> Like many Central Asian states, Pakistan has close economic relations with China through the Belt and Road Initiative and has long been silent about human rights abuses in East Turkistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan has adopted a stance of denial toward the current internment campaign.<sup>46</sup> Reports describe how Pakistani citizens have become separated from their Uyghur spouses and children in East Turkistan. Many of them are simply told their partners and children have been taken for training.<sup>47</sup>



***(f) Saudi Arabia***

In January 2020, Uyghurs resident in Saudi Arabia described how the Chinese Embassy in Riyadh had not issued a passport to a Uyghur applicant since 2018. Uyghurs are only able to receive a travel document for one-way travel to China. Uyghur students sent a letter to the Chinese consulate in Jeddah asking why passports and not travel documents have been issued to Han Chinese resident in Saudi Arabia. Uyghur linguist and activist Abduweli Ayup told *AFP* at least five Uyghurs had been deported to China from Saudi Arabia since 2016. One Uyghur student said three of his friends were now untraceable following their return to China. Beijing has labeled Saudi Arabia one of 26 “sensitive” countries, and Uyghurs with Saudi connections through family or residence have been interned in camps.

If deported because of expired paperwork, prison or internment is the likely outcome for any Uyghur.<sup>54</sup> *Radio Free Asia* reported many Uyghurs in the kingdom are now seeking to move to Turkey to avoid returning to China.<sup>55</sup>

***(i) Undisclosed Countries***

Uyghurs have also spoken to the international media and human rights organizations about the denial of passport renewals without specifying the country where the application was made. One Uyghur identified as “Mehmetjan from Aksu” told *Hong Kong Free Press* about an incident when he was stopped at an immigration check in an airport outside of China because his passport had almost expired. When he went to renew it, he was denied.<sup>56</sup>

In 2018, Human Rights Watch documented a story of one Uyghur woman experiencing family separation due to an expired passport, Chinese state intimidation, and document confiscation. She told their researchers: “On March 20, 2017, my husband went to China because his Chinese passport was about to expire. He submitted his passport to the Chinese consulate [in the country where we reside] but they told him he had to go back to China to renew it. . . . When he went there, they told him they’d stopped issuing passports . . . and they took his passport. . . . I also have a 13-year-old younger sister and she is studying in China. She was here in [this foreign country] but three of our relatives called and told us that we had to make sure she goes back to China; if not, they’d be detained themselves. So, we had no choice but to send her back. She is studying in the sixth grade and the authorities took her passport. Her passport is about to expire and that means . . . she risks being stuck in China forever.”<sup>57</sup>

As one observer noted, the denial of passport renewals “puts these Uighur expatriates and asylum seekers in a double bind. If they return to Xinjiang, they are damned. If they stay where they are, it will be so with an expired passport, which exposes them to the likelihood of being deported back to China, where certain interrogation, abuse, and imprisonment awaits.”<sup>58</sup>

## **WEAPONIZING PASSPORTS**

### **(1) Discriminatory Practices in the Application Process**

In 2013, UHRP published a report on the difficulties faced by Uyghurs in China when attempting to obtain a passport. The research disclosed discriminatory practices in the application process, official corruption, and targeted confiscations of passports in a pattern stretching back to 2006.<sup>59</sup> Since UHRP issued the report, conditions surrounding passports have not improved. The problems identified in 2013 remain ongoing, and China's weaponization of Uyghur passports has now extended beyond its borders. UHRP spoke to a Uyghur who lived in inner China and operated an agency to help process visas for Uyghur applicants. He described tightening controls on Uyghurs in possession of passports and related how police pressured him to divulge the names of Uyghurs who had asked him for help to obtain visas.<sup>60</sup>

The passport application process has become particularly onerous. In 2015, Human Rights Watch identified new measures requiring residents of the Uyghur region to submit bio-data with their applications, including “a blood (DNA) sample, a voice sample, a 3D image of themselves, and their fingerprints.” Furthermore, all submissions required supporting information not mandatory in other parts of the country, such as the identity documents of friends and family they planned to meet overseas.<sup>61</sup> Ghulja residents confirmed the new bio-data requirements to overseas reporters, and student Gulgine Tashmemet told friends before she went missing that the police in Ili had asked her to provide blood samples so that she could obtain permission to continue her studies in Malaysia.<sup>62,63</sup> In 2015, Zhang Long described how his Uyghur wife, Hayrigul, applied for a passport in Maralbeshi despite their residence in Tianjian, saying that she was required to submit fingerprints, a photograph, and a blood sample in order for the document to be issued. Chinese police subsequently arrested Hayrigul for “attempting to flee the country,” and she died in detention.<sup>64</sup>

Human Rights Watch noted the new procedures were in place for members of all ethnic groups in East Turkistan; however, Uyghurs face official discrimination in how their names appear on passports. The main grievances center on the pinyin transliteration of Uyghur names and the reversal of first and last names according to Chinese naming conventions (see section 1(e) above). One Uyghur commenting online about pinyin transliterations wrote:

When you're Uyghur, and you have a Chinese passport, you have to face tons of questions about it. First of all, my last name and first name also mess up; secondly, pinyin version is really really hard to pronounce, but I have to use it because it was written on all my official document. Lastly, when your name documented wrong, you have a new name like Nofirstname and your last name. I used Nofirstname Aierken for a long time.<sup>65</sup>

China has implemented measures to standardize non-Mandarin names to eliminate discrepancies between government-issued identity documents. However, the guidelines

do not address the issue that government-issued documents still default to using pinyin transliteration of the Chinese versions of names over the use of native-language renderings from the Uyghur, Tibetan, Kazakh, or Mongol languages. In addition, the standardizing measures are linked with Xi Jinping’s calls for “national unity” indicating Mandarin as the language of preference.<sup>66</sup>



Photos showing the amount of stamps and signatures of different bureaus in Khotan required for a Uyghur citizen to obtain a passport. © Radio Free Asia

## (2) Official Corruption

There is clear evidence that Uyghurs faced continuing official obstruction in securing passports following UHRP’s 2013 report. To circumvent a discriminatory system, Uyghurs had no choice but to resort to bribery of officials to expedite long waiting times or avoid outright denial. The long-standing need for Uyghurs to bribe officials to obtain a passport is also recorded in a 2010 UHRP report detailing the experiences of Uyghur asylum seekers in Europe and in other Uyghurs’ testimonies. Internment camp survivor Mihrigul Tursun told *Radio Free Asia* she paid over 40,000 yuan in bribes and waited for nine months to get a passport in 2009.<sup>67,68</sup>

In 2013, the Chinese authorities introduced a streamlined system so that passport applications could be made through ‘one-stop’ processing centers. However, the opening of these centers was not extended to Uyghur-majority cities predominately in the south of the region, and ‘streamlining’ any passport application still involved bribing officials.<sup>69</sup>

The regular fee for a passport as reported in 2013 was USD 40; however, some Uyghurs claimed to have spent over \$3,000 to receive a passport.<sup>70</sup>

In an open letter to then-Xinjiang Party Secretary Zhang Chunxian and posted in 2015, a Uyghur woman stated: “Although any Xinjiang resident of Han nationality can get an ordinary private passport within two weeks in Urumchi . . . my passport application has not been approved for five years. Finally, I was forced to use the loopholes in the corrupt system to ‘purchase’ a passport usually costing 240 yuan for 80,000 yuan.”<sup>71</sup> The limits placed on Uyghurs in getting passports meant owning one “was a status symbol akin to owning a Louis Vuitton bag.”<sup>72</sup>

As research indicates, the procurement of official documents in China has consistently been difficult for Uyghurs. This official obstruction is now extended to Uyghurs abroad. As UHRP noted in a 2018 briefing, Uyghurs in the United States often face insurmountable obstacles in beginning new lives overseas due to difficulty in securing documents from China evidencing life events, such as marriages, academic qualifications, and births.<sup>73</sup> UHRP learned Uyghurs were unable to obtain documents from Chinese government entities because of Chinese officials’ imposition of arbitrary conditions or because relatives in East Turkistan who would normally be in a position to assist in getting documents feared any contact with overseas Uyghurs.

### **(3) Domestic Recalls and Confiscations**

In 2016, Chinese authorities in East Turkistan stepped up restrictions through the implementation of regulations requiring residents to hand in passports for ‘safekeeping’ and to request permission from the police before leaving China.<sup>74</sup> In November 2016, Human Rights Watch reported that the Shehezi Public Security Bureau had posted details to social media the previous month telling locals to submit passports by February 28, 2017. Human Rights Watch noted the policy was in place across the region confirming the measures in seven other administrative areas.<sup>75</sup>

The *New York Times* reported on the passport recall campaign in a December 1, 2016 article. The report highlighted the shifting narrative on the government’s motives, observing:

Last month, Global Times, a popular nationalist newspaper, reported on the passport rules, saying in an online article that Xinjiang officials had ‘tightened passport regulations’ and were ‘requiring all residents to hand in their passports.’ It quickly deleted that article, and two days later it reported that the police were not holding ordinary residents’ passports, except for those with ‘suspicious connections.’<sup>76</sup>

*Radio Free Asia* also confirmed details of the passport recall with county officials in Turpan Prefecture. The recall came shortly after the appointment of regional Party Secretary Chen Quanguo, who oversaw five years of harsh policies in Tibet. Uyghur American Association President Ilshat Hassan commented on the growing scope of the

recall: “Chen Quanguo not only confiscated the passports from the Uyghur people who are in the Uyghur region, but also pressured the Uyghurs who have been traveling as visitors or students abroad to turn in their passports.”<sup>77</sup> One Uyghur described how after recently returning from overseas his phone and passport were immediately confiscated during a police interrogation about his time in the United States.<sup>78</sup> By December 2016, the recall was extended to Uyghurs all throughout China.<sup>79</sup>



*Hankiz Danish describes the case of her father Danish Hashim, May 7, 2019.<sup>80</sup>*

The Chinese government’s policy of recall and confiscation has had an alarming impact on overseas Uyghurs, often resulting in what appears to be permanent family separations. The following cases, briefly summarized, are publicly documented and form only a small sample of the true depth of family separation through passport denial:

- Gulchehra Hoja, a journalist at *Radio Free Asia's* Uyghur Service, spoke to Amnesty International about how her parents have not only had their passports confiscated but were also detained in internment camps in 2017. Her father is still missing.<sup>81</sup>
- Sayragul Sauytbay, a former teacher at an internment camp, told a Kazakh court “she couldn’t travel to Kazakhstan with her family in 2016 because, as a state official of ethnic Kazakh descent, her passport had been confiscated to prevent her from fleeing.”<sup>82</sup>
- Sadam Abudusalam, a Uyghur resident in Australia, described how the police confiscated his wife Nadila’s passport when she returned to East Turkistan in 2017. He has been trying to reunite with her and their two-year-old son for two years. Speaking to *TheNewsLens*, he said: “My wife didn’t break any law, so at least the Chinese government needs to explain to the world why they still won’t give my wife’s passport back to her.”<sup>83</sup>
- Chaudhry Javed Atta, a Pakistani citizen married to a Uyghur, told *AP* he had to leave his wife and two sons aged five and seven in China in 2017 because the Chinese authorities had confiscated their passports.<sup>84</sup>
- Maria Mohammad, a Uyghur resident in the United States, left behind her husband, Sadir Ali, in 2015 because his passport was confiscated by the Chinese authorities. Inability to obtain travel documents separated her from her husband, who she now fears is detained.<sup>85</sup>
- Nurbulat Tursunjan, who relocated to the Almaty region in Kazakhstan in 2016, spoke to the *BBC* and told reporters his elderly parents could not leave China to come to join him in Kazakhstan because the authorities took away their passports.<sup>86</sup>
- Ferkat Jawdat, a U.S. citizen, revealed the Chinese authorities had denied his mother a passport since 2010 and are using threats to her safety in attempt to end his advocacy efforts overseas.<sup>87</sup>
- Abdulhamid Tursun, a political asylee in Belgium since 2017, told the overseas media that his wife, Horiyat Abula, and their four children have been unable to secure passports to join him. Horiyat applied for a passport in 2017 but has not been granted one as of late 2019.<sup>88</sup> He told *AFP*: “They are at home, under surveillance, and don’t have the right to leave without authorization. . . . The Chinese government has still not given them the passports they need to leave the country.”<sup>89</sup>
- Bota Kussaiyn, a Kazakh student at Moscow State University, described how her father returned to China in 2017 to see a doctor; however, authorities confiscated his passport after his arrival. Bota then found out that her father had been sent to an internment camp.<sup>90</sup>
- Dilmurat Tursun, a 52-year-old Uyghur with permanent residence in Australia, returned to China with his wife, Dilbar Abdurahaman, in 2017. According to family members, the authorities confiscated their passports and they were unable to return to their home in Sydney. In 2018, Dilmurat went missing and is presumably being held in some form of extrajudicial detention.<sup>91</sup>

#### (4) Overseas Recalls

“When the police talk to us,” he said, “they are suspicious about everything: ‘Do you smoke? Do you drink?’ If you don’t, they’ll ask you why not. They’ll ask you if you pray. They’ll ask you if you want to go abroad, or if you’ve previously applied for or had a passport. If you look at the policeman, he’ll ask you what you’re looking at him for; if you look down at the floor, he’ll ask you why you’re looking down at the floor. Whenever we take a train, there’s always a separate room that we have to go through before we’re allowed to leave the station, where they check our documents and question us.”<sup>92</sup>

The above quote recounts a conversation between a Uyghur living in inner China and researcher Gene A. Bunin. The exchange shows how the mere desire to own a passport is one of many behaviors that authorities use to classify Uyghurs as suspicious. An interest in traveling overseas or a family connection abroad could land a Uyghur in an internment camp.

The environment for Uyghurs obtaining a passport has changed from one of discrimination, obstruction, and confiscation into one characterized by the perception of hostility to the Chinese state and threat of detention, leading to the implementation of a policy to force Uyghurs overseas to return to China for political vetting. The pressure exerted on Uyghurs living outside of China exhibits the government’s policy to extend control over Uyghur bodies regardless of residence.

In early 2017, reports emerged that Chinese authorities had issued orders to overseas Uyghur students to return to their hometowns by May 20 of that year. Citing interviews conducted in East Turkistan and Egypt, *Radio Free Asia* described how relatives in China were being used as “hostages” to ensure the students’ return. A police officer in Barin township told *Radio Free Asia*: “From what I understand, the goal of this policy is to identify their political and ideological stance, and then educate them about our country’s laws and current developments.” Officials in Barin confirmed the order had been issued to Uyghur individuals in Turkey, France, Australia, and the United States.<sup>93</sup>



**NUR**  
@uyghur\_nur



Yep, been asked to scan every single page of passport (overseas passport, not Chinese) and send. Been asked to report on who we knew, said we are too busy, we dont know other Uighurs, did not work, so just made up some random names...

*Uyghur Twitter user @uyghur\_nur describes their experience of interacting with the Chinese authorities while living overseas.*<sup>94</sup>

Uyghurs living in France detailed how Chinese police orders went beyond demands to return to China to disclosing personal information and documents including, “their home, school, and work addresses, photos, scans of their French or Chinese ID cards, and, in some cases, the ID cards of their spouses and scans of their marriage certificates if they were married in France.”<sup>95</sup> Journalist Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, who has reported extensively on overseas Chinese government influence operations, wrote that the aim of gathering such extensive information is the creation of a global registry of all Uyghur citizens abroad. Allen-Ebrahimian added that the database also includes license plate numbers and bank details, and that Chinese police are resorting to intimidation to get the information.<sup>96</sup>

This use of fear was reported in a February 2019 *Guardian* article which related how Rashida Abdughapur, a Uyghur living in Adelaide, received a video call via WeChat from Chinese police. The police showed her mother handcuffed at the police station and demanded information from Rashida. She showed them “her driver’s licence, passport, visa and Medicare card.” In a second case, a 34 year-old Uyghur took a call from a relative who asked him to send “copies of his children’s birth certificates and passports, as well as where they went to school, where the family lived and where he and his wife worked.” If he did not, the police would send the family member to an internment camp.<sup>97</sup>

The existence of a registry of personal information and documents on Uyghur citizens residing abroad is extremely troubling. The Chinese government’s near blanket refusal to renew Uyghurs’ passports at Chinese consulates overseas and to issue travel documents valid only for travel to China means many Uyghurs with expiring passports are vulnerable. If a Uyghur decides not to return to China and to continue living overseas with an expired passport, the Chinese police is not only maintaining surveillance over these individuals but is also aware of their legal status, leaving them open to state pressure.

## **(5) Fake Passports**

As obstruction, corruption, denial, and confiscation began marking the Uyghur experience with passports in China, individuals turned toward the purchase of fake passports. In 2015, the year new regulations on submission of biodata were put in place, reports described arrests in Shanghai of ten Turkish citizens for supplying Uyghurs with altered Turkish passports. Two Chinese citizens were also detained along with nine Uyghurs who had attempted to use the documents to leave China. Without any evidence provided, the Uyghurs were described as terrorists in the Chinese state media.<sup>98,99</sup> However, in 2015, three Uyghurs convicted on terror-related charges in Indonesia were also caught in possession of fake Turkish passports.<sup>100</sup>

On May 18, 2016, *Radio Free Asia* described how Turkish authorities had detained 98 Uyghurs at Ataturk Airport in Istanbul for being in possession of fake passports. The Uyghurs were on their way to Saudi Arabia for the annual Hajj pilgrimage.<sup>101</sup> A report in

the Turkish media outlet *Hurriyet* added that the Uyghurs were traveling on fake Kyrgyz passports; however, the article claimed the group were on an Umrah pilgrimage.<sup>102</sup> The cost of each passport was 2,500 euros, and the Turkish police arrested four individuals for their role in supplying the passports. In an interview with *RFE/RL*, the chief of the Kyrgyz passport authority claimed that fake passport suppliers are making a lot of money from Uyghurs attempting to travel across borders.<sup>103,104</sup>

UHRP is concerned that as the crisis with expiring Uyghur passports continues, the problems with fake passports could reemerge and intensify as more Uyghurs look for alternatives to legal documents that enable them to travel across borders. While the growth of illegal activity among suppliers should concern governments, law enforcement in countries with large numbers of Uyghur residents should be alert regarding the vulnerability of Uyghurs to criminal gangs supplying counterfeit travel documents. The need to resort to fake documents is a further indicator of the difficulties Uyghurs have in securing passports not only for personal trips but also for fulfilling religious practices.

However, even Uyghurs who possess genuine passports issued by states other than China are not guaranteed safety when traveling in China, which demonstrates a further danger to Uyghurs. A Uyghur who has held Turkish citizenship since 2011 was told while traveling in China on tourist visa in 2017 that his passport was fake. Police “brought him in handcuffs to a jail cell on the other side of the country, so damp and dark that he immediately became sick.” He told *BuzzFeed*: “At first I wasn’t that scared. . . . I told my cellmates I’m a Turkish citizen, and sooner or later they’d release me.” *BuzzFeed* recorded cases of disappearances among Turkish citizens of Uyghur descent in three other families.<sup>105</sup>

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

### *To UNHCR:*

1. Ensure that states (holding Uyghur asylum seekers) take steps to ensure that stateless persons have effective access to Convention Travel Documents based on the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1954 Statelessness Convention.
2. Take immediate steps, in line with UNHCR's 2014 "I Belong" campaign, which aims to end statelessness by 2024, to ensure that Uyghurs in particular are granted access to asylum procedures in host countries.
3. Ensure that stateless persons have the same access to Convention Travel Documents as refugees, in accordance with the Refugee and Statelessness Conventions.

### *To states hosting Uyghurs:*

1. Follow the lead of Sweden and Germany by making a commitment not to deport Uyghurs to China.
2. Pass legislation aimed at identifying and protecting stateless people within their territories to avoid generation to generation statelessness
3. Close gaps in nationality laws to ensure Uyghurs and others, particularly children born to already stateless parents, are able to obtain proper documentation.

### *To China:*

1. Immediately grant requested travel documents, such as passports, to citizens abroad without prejudice based on ethnic origin.
2. Uphold the Passport Law of the People's Republic of China, in particular Article 2, which states that citizens cannot be deprived of their right to a passport without reasonable justification, to ensure that all are able to freely obtain passports in order to travel domestically and abroad without prejudice.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data collected for this report is a synthesis of primary and secondary sources. UHRP staff interviewed five Uyghurs in Turkey and the United States in September 2019. The languages used in the interviews were Uyghur and English. Interviewees were selected at random through the diaspora network. These individuals were also willing to speak to UHRP about their experiences despite Chinese state repression. UHRP offered complete anonymity to interviewees, which some declined. In cases where interviewees requested anonymity, UHRP changed all identifying details. Secondary sources were collected from online sources in Chinese and English. To organize the sources, a critical discourse analysis was applied. Texts were coded into broad themes and by geographical location. The texts selected primarily ranged from 2013 (the date of UHRP's last reporting on passports) to September 2019.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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About the Uyghur Human Rights Project:

UHRP promotes the rights of the Uyghur people through research-based advocacy. It publishes reports and analysis in English and Chinese to defend Uyghurs' civil, political, social, cultural, and economic rights according to international human rights standards.

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