

International

# From camps to factories: Muslims accuse China of using forced labor

## 'Re-education' - efforts to fight terrorism and separatism: China

**ALMATY:** As Gulzira Auelkhan toiled stitching gloves in a factory in China's troubled Xinjiang region, her managers made no secret of where her production would be sold. "They told us openly that the gloves will be sold abroad, so we should do a good job," Auelkhan recalled of a labor stint she says was enforced by Chinese "re-education" officials. Auelkhan, a 39-year-old Chinese citizen of Kazakh descent, says she was part of a network of mostly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang who pass from what China calls "vocational training centers" to factories where they are forced to work for far less than the local minimum wage.

China says the education centers are part of its efforts to fight terrorism and separatism in Xinjiang—a region populated by mostly Muslim minority groups—and denies any use of forced labor. But rights groups, and former workers like Auelkhan, say the practice used against Chinese minorities is widespread and at least one foreign company has dropped its Chinese supplier over the concerns. Auelkhan says she was transferred to the glove factory at the Jiafang industrial estate in Xinjiang's Yining county after spending 15 months in two different "re-education" facilities.

More than a million people from Muslim minorities—mostly ethnic Uighurs, but also Kazakhs like Auelkhan, Kyrgyz and Hui—are being held in internment centers across Xinjiang, according to a United Nations panel of experts. Auelkhan has residency rights in Kazakhstan but had travelled to China to see family when she was detained and put into a re-education centre. She said life in the camps was brutal, with residents

struck over the head with electrified batons for spending more than two minutes in the bathroom.

### US firm halts imports

So even though they were not free to leave, it was an improvement when she and hundreds of other camp inmates were transferred to work at the factory, Auelkhan told AFP in Kazakhstan's biggest city Almaty. "Every day we were taken to

between 820 and 1,460 yuan per month, according to official statistics. Beijing and officials in the region have fiercely denied any connection between the camps and under-paid labor. A representative of the Xinjiang Autonomous Region Government Press Office told AFP by email that there was "no labor contract between Education and Training Centers and enterprises" and "no enterprise obtains labor from training centers".

But rights groups insist the connection exists and some companies have started taking notice. In January, Badger Sportswear, a firm based in the US state of North Carolina, announced it would stop sourcing clothing from its Xinjiang supplier Hetian Taida over concerns it was using forced labour linked to the "re-education" campaign. Auelkhan believes she was only released from forced labour because of a public campaign launched by her husband and supported by a Xinjiang-focused rights group in Almaty.



### China denies camp and under-paid labor connection

and from a dormitory three kilometers from the factory," she said, hugging the five-year-old daughter she didn't see for nearly two years. "When we were studying at the camp they told us we would be taught a trade and work for three months," Auelkhan said. Auelkhan said she was paid only 320 yuan (\$48/42 euros) for close to two months' work before her time at the factory was curtailed in December and she was allowed to return to her family in Kazakhstan.

Xinjiang's average minimum wage ranges

### 'Assigned a job'

Originally, re-education officials had told her and other centre residents that they would be "at (their) disposal" for at least six months, she said. Oil-rich Kazakhstan's government is a Beijing ally that positions itself as "the buckle" in China's trillion-dollar Belt and Road trade and investment agenda, a strategy for infrastructure and development projects throughout Asia, Europe and Africa. Kazakh diplomats have entered into a dialogue with Beijing over Xinjiang, without publicly mentioning the re-education centers or criticizing China's policies. In December a representative of Kazakhstan's



**ALMATY:** Petitioners with relatives missing or detained in Xinjiang hold up photos of their loved ones during a press event at the office of the Ata Jurt rights group in Almaty, Kazakhstan. —AFP

foreign ministry said during a briefing that China had allowed more than 2,000 ethnic Kazakhs to travel to Kazakhstan as "a kind gesture".

The ministry refused repeated requests from AFP to clarify the remarks, which lent hope to many in Kazakhstan that they would be able to bring Xinjiang-based relatives over the border to

safety. For most, however, this has been a crushing false dawn. During a recent visit to the Almaty office of the Ata Jurt rights group dedicated to supporting relatives of the Xinjiang missing, AFP spoke to several Kazakhs who claim their relatives have merely swapped "re-education" for other forms of confinement. —AFP

## Japan okays research using human cells in animals

**TOKYO:** Japan has given the green light to a controversial research process involving implanting animals with human stem cells that could eventually help grow human organs for transplant inside animal hosts. The decision by the education and science ministry Friday to revise its guidelines means Japanese researchers can now apply for permits to carry out studies employing the technique, a ministry official said.

The process involves implanting embryonic animals, likely first pigs, with human "induced pluripotent stem" (iPS) cells, which can transform into the building blocks of any part of the body. The idea is for the iPS cells to grow into transplantable human organs inside the animal embryos. Japan had previously required researchers to terminate animal embryos implanted with human cells after 14 days "due to ethical concerns over the vague line between human beings and animals," the official said.

The old regulations also prevented researchers from placing the embryos into animal wombs to allow them to develop. But the ministry has dropped both restrictions "as we have concluded that there is technically zero risk of producing a new organism mixing human and animal elements under the research," the official added.

Researchers will now, for instance, be allowed to create animal embryos with a human pancreas and transplant it into the womb of a pig, which could in theory result in the birth of a baby pig with a human pancreas. In practice, where similar research has been carried elsewhere, the embryos have been terminated before delivery, avoiding the thorny moral issues raised by creating creatures that contain both human and animal cells. —AFP

## New Zealand tells 'bumbling jihadi' he's on his own

**WELLINGTON:** A New Zealander dubbed "the bumbling jihadi" can expect little help from his homeland after being captured in Syria by forces fighting the Islamic State group, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern warned yesterday. Mark Taylor, 42, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation he spent five years with Islamic State but fled in December and surrendered to Kurdish forces because conditions had become unbearable.

"There was no food, no money, basic services were pretty much collapsed," he said from a Kurdish prison. "I was in a pickle myself and had to make a final deci-

sion, which was to leave." Taylor earned his derogatory nickname in 2015 after sending out a series of pro-IS tweets but forgetting to turn off the geo-tagging function, giving away his location. He told the ABC the bungle earned him 50 days in an IS prison.

He also burned his New Zealand passport in a propaganda video and urged extremists in Australia and New Zealand to "commence operations". Prime Minister Ardern ruled out stripping Taylor of his New Zealand citizenship because he is not a dual citizen and so has no alternative. "We of course follow our obligations in international law regarding ensuring we do not deem anyone stateless," she said. But she also said New Zealand could offer Taylor no consular assistance because it had no diplomats where he is being held and only knew what had been gleaned from media reports.

"We have no connection with the forces detaining him, so it's difficult for us to provide information," she said, adding that Taylor would likely have to contact

New Zealand officials in Turkey if he hoped to eventually return home. Justice Minister Andrew Little said if that happened, Taylor could probably expect to face charges under anti-terror laws. "It is very clear what happens when you transgress the provisions of that legislation... there's a range of penalties, including imprisonment," he said. Ardern said New Zealand was not obliged to give Taylor legal representation if he was charged overseas, nor did it have to pay his way home.

Ardern refused to say how serious a threat Taylor would represent if he went back home but said "contingency planning" had been made to ensure New Zealanders were safe from returning jihadis. She also declined to comment on details of Taylor's ABC interview, in which he insisted he was not an IS fighter and lamented the fact he had been "too poor" to afford a Yazidi slave while with the extremist group. "I wouldn't want to be drawn on those comments because I do not want to be seen to jeopardize any potential case in the future," she said. —AFP

## China accuses detained Canadian of stealing state secrets

**BEIJING:** China yesterday accused detained Canadian citizen Michael Kovrig of stealing state secrets which were passed on to him from another detained Canadian, Michael Spavor, in what is likely to further ramp up tension between Ottawa and Beijing. Businessman Spavor, who worked with North Korea, and former diplomat Kovrig were picked up in early December, shortly after Canada arrested Huawei Technologies Co Ltd chief

financial officer Meng Wanzhou, who faces extradition to the United States. China has repeatedly demanded Meng be released, and reacted angrily last week when Canada's government approved extradition proceedings against her.

In a short statement on its microblog, the ruling Communist Party's Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission said Kovrig had often entered China using an ordinary passport and business visas "stealing and spying on sensitive Chinese information and intelligence via a contact in China". "Spavor was Kovrig's main contact and provided him with intelligence," the commission added, without giving details. Kovrig severely violated Chinese laws, and China will start the next judicial proceedings in due course, it said. "China is a country with rule of law and will firmly crack down on criminal acts that severely undermine national security."

While Canada says China has made no specific link between the detentions and Meng's arrest, experts and

former diplomats say they have no doubt it is using the cases of the two men to pressure Canada. Kovrig works for the International Crisis Group (ICG), which focuses on conflict resolution and has denied any involvement in espionage. Canadian diplomats have been allowed to see the two men. However, sources familiar with the case have said Kovrig has not been allowed access to lawyers or family members, unlike Huawei's Meng.

It is not clear what conditions Spavor is being held in. China has said it is fully guaranteeing both men's lawful rights. Kovrig also holds Hungarian citizenship. Canada arrested Meng on Dec. 1 as she was changing planes in the city of Vancouver, at the request of the United States, which has filed sweeping charges against Huawei and Meng that paint the company as a national security threat. Meng has been charged with bank and wire fraud to violate US sanctions against Iran. She is free on bail and denies the charges against her. —Reuters

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