

# Opinion – The Hidden Genocide Behind Uyghur Forced Labor

Written by Mamtimin Ala

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MAMTIMIN ALA, OCT 4 2024

The use of forced labor is a tool of control, exploitation, and dehumanization. Throughout history, forced labor has been deployed by regimes as a method to subjugate populations, strip individuals of their freedom, and use them as mere instruments of production. While forced labor exists in various forms globally, it reaches a particularly cruel dimension when employed as part of a broader system of repression and genocide. In modern times, no clearer example of this exists than in East Turkistan, which Beijing refers to as the “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region”, where China uses forced labor as a key component of its genocide against the native Uyghur and other Turkic peoples. What might appear on the surface as economic exploitation is, in fact, a systemic effort to dehumanize and destroy an entire population, both physically and psychologically. Since 1949, when the PLA invaded East Turkistan, Uyghurs have been subjected to various forms of forced labor. For example, “hashar” is Uyghur terminology for forced and unpaid labor in fields and roads, is still used in East Turkistan.

The systematic colonization and persecution of the East Turkistani people escalated in 2014 under the directives of Xi Jinping, when China established a vast network of prisons and internment camps. In these facilities, millions of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and other Turkic peoples are incarcerated, subjected to torture, indoctrination, and extermination. Outside the camps and prisons, millions of Uyghurs are being forcibly transferred to factories both within and outside East Turkistan, where they endure forced labor, contributing to a modern system of slavery.

This system of Uyghur forced labor is not confined to East Turkistan and China alone—it has international implications. Many global corporations are complicit in this crime against humanity, with China using deceptive language like “poverty alleviation through the labor transfer” to mask the reality. Both Chinese domestic companies and multinational brands participate in these abuses. Notable car manufacturers such as General Motors, Tesla, BYD, Toyota, and Volkswagen have been implicated for failing to minimize the risk of Uyghur forced labor being used in their supply chains. Likewise, fashion brands like H&M and Zara are complicit in exploiting Uyghur labor.

In response, the United States enacted the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, effective since 2022, banning the importation of goods produced through forced labor in East Turkistan. Yet despite international attention, China continues its inhumane practices by either shifting Uyghur forced laborers out of East Turkistan into Chinese provinces or placing labels falsely claiming the goods were produced in Chinese provinces outside of East Turkistan.

For China, forced labor is an essential tool in executing the Uyghur genocide. It enables greater control over the Uyghur population politically, economically, socially, and psychologically. Politically, China leverages cheap Uyghur forced labor to attract foreign companies, making them complicit in the genocide. By doing so, China exerts influence over countries like France, Germany, and the United States, where these corporations are headquartered, stifling any political or diplomatic action against the genocide. This strategy not only strengthens China’s political power but also allows it to infiltrate foreign nations by co-opting their businesses and governments.

Economically, forced labor is a lucrative aspect of the Uyghur genocide. As has occurred in other genocides, the labor of a persecuted group is exploited to benefit the perpetrators and further perpetuate the oppression. The Holocaust is a clear historical parallel. Today, Chinese companies are profiting massively from the forced labor of

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Uyghurs. Fast fashion companies like Shein and Temu, which are gaining popularity in western markets, owe their lower prices to the exploitation of Uyghur forced laborers.

The use of forced labor in the Uyghur genocide not only disrupts familial structures and erodes social cohesion but also aims to dismantle Uyghur cultural identity by melting individuals within a Chinese-centric environment. As Uyghurs are forcibly removed from their communities, traditional support networks weaken, facilitating the Chinese government's imposition of its Han Chinese ideological framework. Psychologically, the trauma inflicted by constant threats of violence, exploitation, and indoctrination leads to profound mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and PTSD, fostering a sense of hopelessness and compliance within the entire population.

Finally, forced Labor obscures the true extent of the Uyghur genocide. By implementing policies of exploitation like "Poverty Alleviation Through Labor Transfer," China creates an illusion that it is "improving" Uyghurs' lives through employment. While this system may not result in the immediate mass deaths seen in the concentration camps and in historic genocides, it nonetheless facilitates the systematic use of Uyghurs as slaves. In a deeply perverse way, this policy presents slavery as a "better" alternative to death, forcing Uyghurs to feel "grateful" to China for the opportunity to survive through servitude.

Within this context, forced labor can be understood as a form of "soft genocide." Uyghurs are being psychologically and physically degraded, dehumanized, and destroyed through forced labor. As they endure endless, humiliating, and alienating tasks, they find no meaning in their labor or their lives. For some, death seems preferable to life as a forced laborer. As Fyodor Dostoevsky once said, "Deprived of meaningful work, men and women lose their reason for existence; they go stark, raving mad." Uyghur forced laborers are being destroyed from within—physically toiling until their deaths.

Currently, the Uyghur population can be divided into three distinct but interconnected groups. The first includes those outside the camps and prisons, living in a way that obscures the genocide. These include politically compliant Uyghurs, including nearly a million Uyghur children who are separated from their families and subjected to trauma and brainwashing in state-run boarding schools and orphanages, and Uyghur officials working for the colonial regime. The second group consists of millions of forced laborers torn apart from their families, working 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, and living in factory dormitories, including hundreds of thousands who have been forcibly relocated to Chinese provinces, slowly working to death. The third group languishes in concentration camps and prisons, facing constant torture, forced starvation, organ harvesting, and awaiting their eventual deaths.

Uyghur forced labor ultimately serves China's goal of minimizing the financial costs of the genocide while accelerating the eradication of the Uyghur people. This practice represents a profound legal and moral shift, reducing the discussion of genocide to one of forced labor—a phenomenon seen globally. This reduction diminishes the unique horror of the Uyghur genocide, allowing the perpetrators to escape full accountability.

This shift also reframes the genocide in terms of race consciousness and debate, diverting attention to broader, more familiar discussions on racism. While this may give Western audiences something concrete to focus on, it also allows them to ignore the ongoing destruction of the Uyghur people and the international community's failure to stop it. For some, it becomes a matter of virtue signaling, masking a deeper neglect of the humanitarian crisis in East Turkistan. Ultimately, this reality leaves us with the conclusion that, for Uyghurs, the only path to survival (and even that being temporary) may be through forced labor in a world where human lives are treated as disposable, and the destruction of an entire people is reduced to a moral dilemma soon to be forgotten.

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## About the author:

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(Rowman and Littlefield 2021) and holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Belgium.