



Uyghur forced labour in murky value chains – the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (China)

Uyghurs are the largest Turkic and Muslim-majority group in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, which some Uyghurs refer to as East Turkistan.¹ The Chinese Government is estimated to have detained as many as 1.8 million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim and Turkic-majority peoples in the region as part of a regime that includes systemic state-imposed forced labour, including in mass internment camps and through broader forced labour programmes.² China has been accused of subjecting minority groups to “re-education”, persecution based on ethnicity and religion, forced labour, mass surveillance, and subjecting women in these groups to forced sterilisation amounting to genocide.³ Many Uyghurs and other Turkic and Muslim-majority peoples in the region have been forcibly transferred to factories in other regions of China.⁴ In reviewing China’s human rights record in 2018, UN experts noted that the treatment of “Uyghur and other predominantly Muslim minorities... may constitute international crimes, in particular crimes against humanity”.⁵

Research has shown that dozens of international brands, including UK companies **Marks & Spencer**, **Primark**, **River Island** and **Tesco** are at risk of using cotton that is produced or processed by Uyghur forced labour.⁶ Companies have called for stronger laws, and a number of companies, including Marks & Spencer, have signed a “call to action” to remove their value chains from the region.⁷

Automotive parts production has greatly increased in the region in recent years. Research demonstrates that a number of UK automobile companies, including **Daimler**, **Aston Martin** and the **London Electric Vehicle Company** – which supplies EV black cabs in London – are among the many major car brands at high risk of sourcing from companies linked to abuses in the Uyghur region.⁸

The UK Overseas Business Risk guidance notes the risk of Uyghur forced labour being part of cotton supply chains, as well as those of textiles, automobiles, electronics and polysilicon – a key material in the production of solar panels.⁹ It has been reported that up to 40% of the UK's solar farms were made using panels made by Chinese solar companies linked to labour camps in the region.¹⁰

The risk of forced labour in the value chains of cotton products from apparel to home furnishings exists at all production stages, from cotton picking to final manufacturing processes: it is estimated that one in five cotton garments on the global marketplace is connected to forced labour of Uyghur workers at some stage of its production process.¹¹ Uyghur support groups have noted that it is effectively impossible for companies to carry out due diligence in the region due to restricted access to factories and workers and a lack of relevant documentary proof of actual labour conditions.¹²

The UK Government has acknowledged that “[t]here is compelling evidence of widespread and systematic human rights violations taking place in Xinjiang, including the extrajudicial detention of over a million Uyghurs since 2017”.¹³ Parliament’s BEIS Committee also concluded that it “received evidence from several companies laying out the steps they have taken to deliver transparency in their supply chains and to ensure they are not profiting from human rights abuses in Xinjiang and other parts of the world...”. Adding that, “...companies selling to millions of British customers cannot guarantee that their value chains are free from forced labour, and that modern slavery legislation and BEIS Department policy are not fit for purpose in tackling this serious situation”.¹⁴

Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee report, *Never Again: The UK’s Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond*, calls on the Government to explore a ban on the import of cotton products made in whole or in part in the region and for this to be extended further to other industries. It also recommends the introduction of “new legislation that will create a legal requirement for businesses and public sector bodies to take concrete measures to prevent and remove the use of forced labour in their value chains. This new duty should be backed up by meaningful sanctions and penalties for non-compliance”.¹⁵

Bans on imports of products made in whole or in part using forced labour from the region have been put in place in the USA.¹⁶ However, similar mechanisms have not yet been put in place in the UK.¹⁷ Uyghur activists pursued a case against the UK Government over its inaction on preventing Xinjiang cotton imports which failed on the basis that it was not proven by the claimants that the specific consignment of cotton imported into the UK was the result of unlawful conduct.¹⁸

There is an urgent need for new legislation which requires companies to address human rights and environmental risks in their value chains, holding companies to account for a failure to prevent abuse. If meaningfully enforced, such legislation would require companies to map and trace the risks of links to Uyghur forced labour throughout value chains and to end sourcing relationships when such links are found – in line with the UNGPs – creating a level playing field.



“ ... I support the call for a new UK law to make sure companies do everything they possibly can to ensure their supply chains are free from abuse and environmental destruction. And that if they aren’t doing this properly, they are held to account for profiting from abuse...”

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Endnotes

- 1 BBC (24 May 2022), "[Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide](#)"; World Uyghur Congress, "[East Turkistan](#)". Accessed 30 January 2023.
- 2 Congressional-Executive Commission on China (March 2020), "[Global supply chains, forced labor and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region](#)", p. 4.
- 3 US Congress (21 April 2021), "[Condemning the ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity being committed against Uyghurs and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups by the People's Republic of China](#)"; The Guardian (9 April 2021), "[There's a good chance your cotton T-shirt was made with Uyghur slave labor](#)".
- 4 Anti-Slavery International (January 2022), "[A call for a UK Business, Human Rights and Environment Act](#)".
- 5 OHCHR (31 August 2022), "[OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Uyghur Autonomous Region, People's Republic of China](#)", p. 44.
- 6 Sheffield Hallam University, Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice (2021), "[Laundering Cotton: How Xinjiang cotton is obscured in international supply chains](#)".
- 7 Human Rights Watch (16 January 2021), "[UK lags behind tackling forced labor in Xinjiang](#)"; End Uyghur Forced Labour, "[Call to Action](#)". Accessed 18 January 2023.
- 8 Sheffield Hallam University, Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice, Nomogaia (December 2022) [Automotive Supply Chains and Forced Labor in the Uyghur Region – Companies](#). Accessed 24 February 2023.
- 9 The UK Government provides information for UK businesses on political, economic and security risks when trading overseas. See [here](#).
- 10 The Guardian (25 April 2021), "[Revealed: UK solar projects using panels from firms linked to Xinjiang forced labour](#)".
- 11 "[There's a good chance your cotton T-shirt was made with Uyghur slave labor](#)".
- 12 World Uyghur Congress (10 March 2021), "[US firms must cut ties to Xinjiang due to extensive forced labor, lack of due diligence: Experts](#)".
- 13 UK Parliament (1 November 2021), "[Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report](#)".
- 14 UK Parliament (17 March 2021), "[Uyghur forced labour in Xinjiang and UK value chains](#)".
- 15 UK Parliament (29 June 2021), "[Never Again: The UK's Responsibility to Act on Atrocities in Xinjiang and Beyond](#)".
- 16 US Department of Homeland Security, [Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act](#). Accessed 3 February 2023.
- 17 Uyghur Human Rights Project, "[International Responses to the Uyghur Crisis](#)". Accessed 17 January 2023; UK Parliament, "[Import of Products of Forced Labour from Xinjiang \(Prohibition\) Bill](#)". Accessed 3 February 2023.
- 18 Financial Times (25 October 2022), "[Uyghur activists sue UK government over Xinjiang cotton imports](#)"; The Guardian