



ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS
REPRESENTATIVE CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH, CHAIR
SENATOR JEFF MERKLEY, COCHAIR

March 6, 2024

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to urge you to consider issuing a Level 4 travel advisory for the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), in light of the ongoing crimes against humanity and genocide in the region and Chinese authorities' use of tourism in the XUAR to both conceal and perpetuate atrocity crimes. American citizens and permanent residents, companies, and other entities should be warned about the risk of enabling atrocity crimes if they participate in tourism to the XUAR. In addition, individuals with a Turkic and/or Muslim background who travel to the XUAR face the risk of wrongful detention, enforced disappearance, exit bans, and other serious human rights abuses.

Chinese authorities are now investing heavily in promoting tourism in the XUAR while continuing to subject Uyghur and other Turkic and Muslim residents of the region to unjust detention, forced labor, and religious repression. Official media and government-backed social media influencers use various media platforms to globally promote the XUAR as a place of prosperity and happiness, while thousands of mosques have been closed or destroyed and Turkic and Muslim religious and cultural figures have been detained. The Chinese government wants to profit from an exploitative version of indigenous culture staged for tourism, though Turkic and Muslim performing artists are likely unable to refuse performing for tourists, since doing so could entail detention or other forms of punishment. Authorities have destroyed many historically Uyghur neighborhoods in the XUAR, transforming some into amusement-park like tourist destinations and displacing the original residents.

Tourists are also being offered "homestay" programs, including in Kashgar's Old City, which was largely demolished and reconstructed without consulting Uyghur residents. As noted by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP), homestay programs in the XUAR have "effectively created transparent boundaries within Uyghur homes, enabling outsiders to peer into their intimate spaces." In recent years, authorities also used homestay programs to surveil Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims and compile information that was later used to justify detaining individuals in mass internment camps. Turkic and Muslim women have reportedly been subjected to rape and sexual abuse as a result of these intrusive programs.

www.cecc.gov

In its travel advisory for mainland China, the Department of State cautions that “the risk of wrongful detention of U.S. nationals by the PRC government exists in the PRC.” We submit that such a risk is heightened in the XUAR, where authorities have carried out mass detention in both mass internment camps and prisons since 2017. Officials have wrongfully detained the relatives of Uyghur-Americans and prevented the relatives of other Uyghur-Americans from leaving China in order to reunite with their family members in the United States. U.S. citizens of Uyghur or other Turkic Muslim descent may be subject to particular scrutiny and harassment, and could be at risk of wrongful detention, while traveling to the XUAR.

In light of the above considerations, we urge you to consider issuing a Level 4 travel advisory for the XUAR. Not doing so may place Americans traveling to the region at undue risk. A failure to caution Americans not to travel to the XUAR also risks endorsing the whitewashing of atrocity crimes and the continuing persecution of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. Thank you for your consideration of this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Chris Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Representative Chris Smith
Chair

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jeffrey A. Merkley". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Senator Jeffrey A. Merkley
Cochair