

## PRESS RELEASE

### **UK: Lawyers & Uyghur human rights group request suspension of unlawful importation of forced labour goods from China**

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The World Uyghur Congress (WUC) and the Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) submitted extensive evidence to the UK's customs authorities and requested the suspension of cotton goods produced with forced labour in China entering the UK. The letter catalogues numerous sources demonstrating the widespread use of forced labour involving China's Uyghur people in its cotton industry and names a number of companies who openly source cotton in East Turkistan (Xinjiang) including **Muji, Uniqlo, Ikea and H&M**. The human rights organisations argue that current imports involve forced labour on such a scale that they violate a number of UK laws including 19th century legislation prohibiting the importation of prison-made goods, and should be halted by the UK's customs authorities.

Since 2017, authorities have systematically detained over one million Uyghur muslims in East Turkistan - the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region - using a network of high-security 'de-extremification' and prison camps. According to GLAN and WUC, unless the companies can produce evidence dislodging a presumption that Xinjiang cotton products have been produced in whole or in part by forced labourers, the UK authorities should suspend the importation of their products.

The systematic incarceration of Uyghurs is the latest instalment in Xinjiang's history of forced prison labour – its "regular" prisons, which contain up to 800,000 Han Chinese and ethnic minority inmates, have long been home to conglomerate prison enterprises. The evidence file details allegations that not only is prison and forced labour widespread and systematic in East Turkistan (Xinjiang), it is intimately linked with the region's cotton industry, which accounts for 84% of the cotton produced by China.

China's mass detention of an ethnic group appears to be on a scale not seen since WWII, and the letter also raises the possibility that this mass incarceration and exaction of forced labour could amount to crimes against humanity. The UK government has already publicly expressed its concern over what it terms "China's systematic human rights violations in Xinjiang" and has raised the issue of human rights violations in Xinjiang directly with the Chinese Government. At the same time China is the UK's largest trade partner after Europe and the US, with trade between the two countries more than doubling over the last decade to reach £70bn in the last financial year.

The letter submitted to HMRC by WUC and GLAN proposes that the imports breach a number of important legal principles in the UK. The UK's Foreign Prison-Made Goods Act 1897 prohibits the importation of goods produced in foreign prisons, and it is also suggested that the importation of

the cotton might put the authorities at risk of falling foul of criminal legislation, notably the Proceeds of Crime Act and the Serious Crime Act.

Rahima Mahmut, the UK project director for the World Uyghur Congress and a UK resident, said: "Living in a free country which upholds respect for human rights, it hurts so much to know that the products that are used in this country are the fruit of the enslavement of my people. I have full confidence that the British government will make the right decision in line with its legal framework which champions the highest standards of human dignity."

"Given the UK Government's strong stance on modern slavery and on China's violations of the human rights of the Uyghur people, we hope the UK authorities take the necessary steps to prevent the importation of goods that are directly derived from the forced labour of an incarcerated people", said Dr Gearóid Ó Cuinn, Director of GLAN.

Dearbhla Minogue, a legal officer with GLAN and a consultant solicitor with Bindmans LLP, said: "The Chinese government is systematically imposing the misery of forced labour on the Uyghur people. This conduct must not be rewarded with unconditional trade - cotton products made under such conditions must no longer be allowed to enter the United Kingdom."

"China's abuses in the XUAR are shocking and raise many urgent questions, including that of liability for crimes against humanity, but also including the problem of apparently widespread use of forced labour in facilities holding people against their will. Other governments, including the UK government, have criticised the Chinese government, and this is important. But they must also avoid complicity in abuses by allowing goods using forced labour to be imported. GLAN argues that the UK government has a legal responsibility to address this end of the problem", said Dr Eva Pils, Legal Advisor to GLAN and Professor of Law at The Dickson Poon School of Law at King's College London.

## **Background**

Uyghurs (or Uighurs, Uygurs) are ethnically and culturally a Turkic people living in the areas of Central Asia referred to as Xinjiang by China and the international community, but referred to by Uyghurs as East Turkistan – their historical homeland. Since 2017, the Chinese government has been operating a vast detention and "de-extremification" scheme, focused on eliminating Uyghur life and culture in order to exert full control over them. It is a highly organised and systematic scheme which has been directed by the president, Xi Jinping. The Chinese government says that these detentions are no more than voluntary internships aimed at poverty alleviation and de-radicalisation, but extraordinary documents leaked in late 2019 showed the extent to which these detentions are coercive and highly secretive: detention centre operators are urged to "*prevent escapes*", ensure "*full video surveillance coverage of dormitories and classrooms free of blind spots, ensuring that guards on duty can monitor in real time,*" in addition to calling for "*strict secrecy.*"

Further reporting by the [Wall Street Journal](#) and others exposed that in addition to being detained, Uyghurs are being forced to work in factories in the region - which export products, particularly textiles - to international markets, including the UK.

### **Notes to editors**

The Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) is a non-profit organisation made up of legal practitioners, academics and investigative journalists that pursues innovative legal actions across borders, challenging states and other powerful actors involved with human rights violations. GLAN has offices in the UK (London) and Ireland (Galway). Contact: Dearbhla Minogue (Legal Officer) | [dminogue@glanlaw.org](mailto:dminogue@glanlaw.org) | +447584599580 | [@glan\\_law](#) | [www.glanlaw.org](http://www.glanlaw.org).

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