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International

The Outlaw Ocean Project Exposes China's Use Of Forced

"Shocking" findings turn spotlight on supermarket chains sourcing fish and squid produced in brutal conditions. By Michaela Herrmann on Nov 15, 2023 @ 08:05 PST 9 min read

Uyghur Labour To Supply UK Seafood Industry

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In the final week of August 2022, thousands of vessels cast off to start China's fishing season. Credit: Dazhong Daily, August 2022. Britain is facing calls to impose import controls on China after an investigation revealed that supermarkets are sourcing seafood from companies exploiting forced labour by minority Uyghurs. The Outlaw Ocean Project documented the forcible transfer of more than a thousand Uyghurs and members of other Muslim minorities 2,000 miles from their homes in landlocked Xinjiang to 10 fish processing plants in

including Tesco, Sainsbury's, Waitrose, Morrisons and other retailers; caterers supplying pubs, hotels and restaurants, schools and universities; and the National Health Service, the four-year investigation found.

beatings, torture, forced sterilisation and political re-education. China has also made widespread use of biometric surveillance and forcibly put Uyghurs to work in Xinjiang's cotton fields, or in other industries around the country, according to human rights groups.

guards; monitoring by officials to increase their daily output and "enthusiasm"; dormitory searches for forbidden items, such as Qurans; and compulsory "patriotic education" sessions in which they are made to learn about the Chinese Communist party's ethnic policy, according to The Outlaw Ocean Project's findings.

"To protect people around the world so no one is exploited in supply chains, we need strong laws that compel companies to take action to mitigate the risk of forced labour," Lea said.

state-imposed forced labour, such as China's exploitation of Uyghurs. With its domestic fishing industry in long-term **decline**, the UK imports more than 80 percent of its seafood. China was the third-largest supplier in 2022, with the UK importing £278 million worth of Chinese seafood, compared to £164 million in 2012, according to Seafish, a public body.

Chinese ships in four high-seas fishing grounds, occasionally boarding the vessels to speak to crews, and contacting them and their families via social media to understand the conditions onboard. While forced labour by Uyghurs takes place in seafood processing plants on shore, Chinese fishing vessels have traditionally relied heavily on foreign workers, particularly from Indonesia, often hiring them through recruitment firms with hidden costs that amount to debt bondage. Since the pandemic, Chinese fishing companies have focused on recruiting impoverished workers from rural China, or other similarly desperate applicants who see the punishing life of a deckhand as their best employment option. The Outlaw Ocean Project used satellite tools and databases with ownership information about Chinese fishing vessels and seafood companies to track the movement of squid and white fish to wholesalers around the world. The researchers published an interactive graphic showing their communications with hundreds of

companies, organisations and agencies about their findings, and a "bait-to-plate" interactive tool tracing

seafood from ships and processing plants to downstream brands and consumers, including what is known

Almost half of the distant-water fishing fleet investigated by The Outlaw Ocean Project was tied to violations

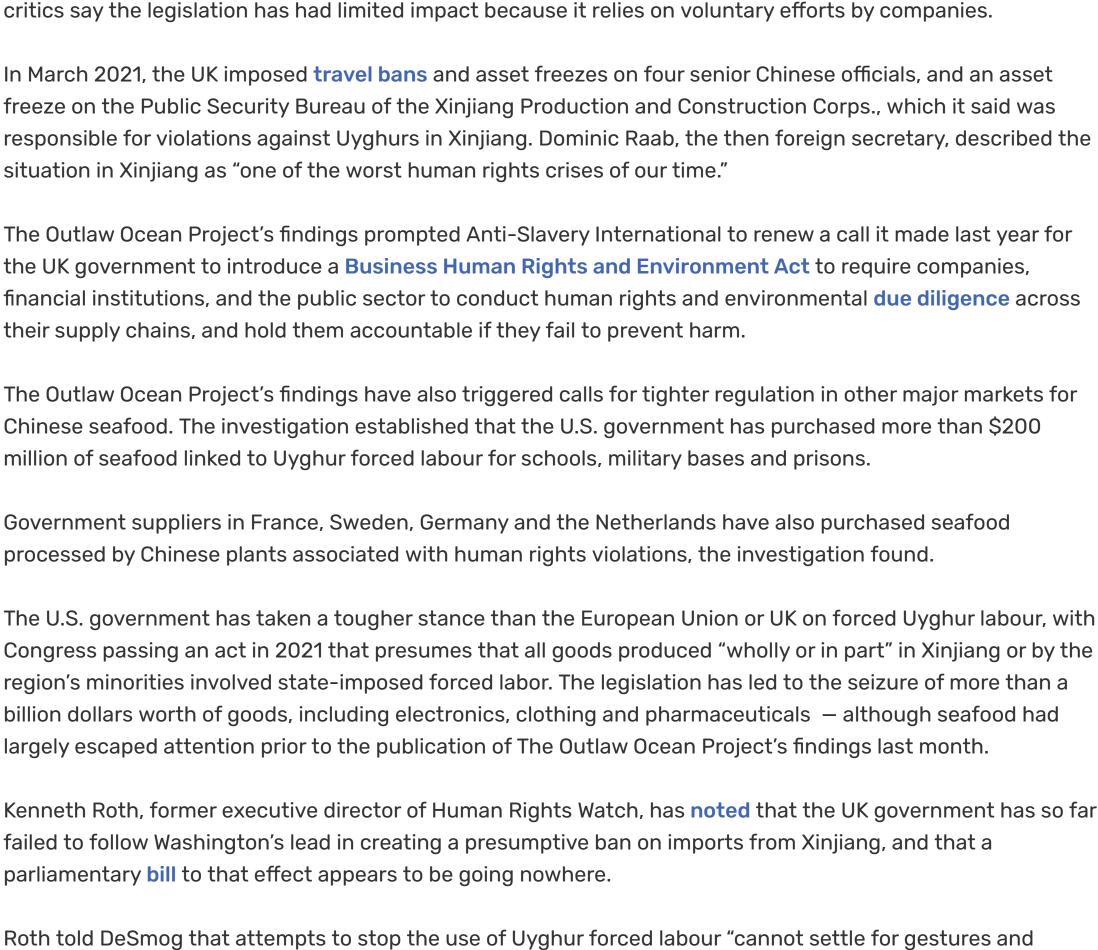
Journalists collected evidence of wage withholding; beatings of deckhands; the confiscation of passports;

of human rights or environmental regulations, with cases of forced labour identified on 29 squid fishing

about possible crimes or other types of concerns within these supply chains.

Part of the biggest fleet in the world, more than 300 Chinese squid ships ride the line of national waters on both sides of South America. The Outlaw Ocean Project/Photographer: Ed Ou, July 9, 2022.

The UK government introduced the Modern Slavery Act in 2015 to combat forced labour in supply chains, but



"We have published guidance on the risks of doing business in Xinjiang, enhanced the UK's export controls and will introduce financial penalties under the Modern Slavery Act," a spokesperson said. After the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights released a 2022 report stating that China's treatment of

A still from a video uploaded to a Chinese government social media account in 2023 depicting a labor transfer organised by authorities in Xinjiang. Credit: Kashgar Media Center.

Tainted Supply Chains The Outlaw Ocean Project found that at least two major European importers of pollock and cod had purchased seafood from Chinese suppliers who use Uyghur forced labour: British company Unibond Seafood

A spokesperson for Young's Seafood told DeSmog that the company takes the allegations of forced labour in its supply chain "extremely seriously" and has launched an independent investigation in response to The Outlaw Ocean Project's findings. ASDA told DeSmog that it did not source seafood ingredients for its own-branded products from two of the

companies using forced labour.

people and communities in supply chains is fundamental to our members' sourcing practices. Forced labour has no place in our retailers' supply chains, and any practices that fall short of our high standards will not be tolerated." Morrisons told DeSmog that it was "liaising with [its] suppliers to ensure that these concerns are fully

Tesco and LidI directed DeSmog to a statement from the British Retail Consortium: "Protecting the welfare of

Chinese exporters identified by The Outlaw Ocean Project as using Uyghur forced labour. ASDA also said it had

no relationship with NorthSeafood Holland, which the investigation found to have received shipments from

Crew on board a Chinese squid vessel use jigs and bright lights to catch squid at night. Credit: © The Outlaw Ocean Project/Photographer: Ed Ou, July 7, 2022.

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regulated

The U.S. government has described China's actions in Xinjiang as a form of genocide. At least a million Uyghurs have been forced into detention camps over the past six years, where they are subjected to The Uyghurs sent to work in seafood plants are kept under tight control, including patrols by uniformed "The investigation is shocking, no one should ever be treated in that way and work in those conditions," Sian Lea, business and human rights manager at London-based human rights nonprofit organisation Anti-Slavery International, told DeSmog. The organisation wants the UK to introduce carefully-crafted import controls to combat imports made with

Captive Labour on the High Seas

vessels, and the risk of forced labour on 59 others.

'International Scrutiny'

Uyghurs violated human rights, China defended its actions in Xinjiang as "counter-terrorism", and said that "the accusation that its policy is 'based on discrimination' is groundless." A spokesperson for China's mission to the UN added that the international community should "see through the clumsy performances and malicious motives of anti-China forces in the U.S. and the West, who attempt to use Xinjiang to contain China."

International, and Netherlands-based NorthSeafood Holland. Both Unibond Seafood International and NorthSeafood Holland supply New York Stock Exchange-listed Nomad Foods, which owns the popular Bird's Eye brand sold throughout Britain and Europe. Bird's Eye

products are stocked by major food retailers in the UK including ASDA, Co-op, Iceland, Morrisons, Ocado,

Unibond Seafood International also supplied Young's Seafood, one of the UK's leading fish suppliers, which

major food retailers — including ASDA, Co-op, Iceland, Morrisons, Ocado, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose —

Young's Seafood products are also used in own-brand products sold by Aldi, ASDA, Co-op, Iceland, Tesco and

stock a wide range of Young's Seafood cod and pollock products, The Outlaw Ocean Project found.

Waitrose, as well as Sainsbury's "Responsibly Sourced" pollock fish fingers, the investigation found.

Young's Seafood and Nomad Foods-owned Bird's Eye have also supplied white fish to the UK healthcare,

products, have made use of ingredients supplied by a seafood processor that buys seafood from fishing

The investigation also found that Fastnet Fish, a UK seafood distributor, buys products from the Shandong

Meijia Group, which uses forced Uyghur labour in seafood plants that export pollock, mackerel, squid, salmon,

Fastnet Fish states on its website that its customers include Iceland (for its own-brand smoked haddock and

pollock fillets) and Westbridge Foods Ltd, a British subsidiary of the largest shrimp farming company in the

public education and university sectors through food service providers, including to primary and secondary

The investigation found that Aldi's brands Fishmonger and The Tasty Catch, which contain squid and calamari

says that its products account for about 40 percent of all the fish retailed in the UK each year. Most of the UK's

investigated." Sainsbury's said that the company took immediate action if it had any reason to believe that its supply chains were in breach of its high ethical and worker welfare standards. "We are working together with our suppliers and wider industry partners to understand the situation and take the most responsible and appropriate next steps," a Sainsbury's spokesperson said. John Lewis, which owns Waitrose, said it expected suppliers to comply with its responsible sourcing code of

Fastnet Fish told the Outlaw Ocean Project that it was "horrified" upon learning of the use of forced labour,

The Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom, Shandong Meijia Group, NorthSeafood

Holland, Aldi, Co-op, Iceland, Ocado, Westbridge Foods Ltd, Nomad Foods and the National Health Service did

Lea, of Anti-Slavery International, warned that the UK risked importing greater amounts of seafood tainted by

human rights abuses if pressure generated by The Outlaw Ocean Project prompted other governments to bar

"If other countries introduce such laws and the UK does not, it will increasingly be a 'dumping ground' for

goods made with forced labour re-routed from other countries with stronger laws," Lea said.

and would no longer source from the Shandong Meijia Group or any of its subsidiaries.

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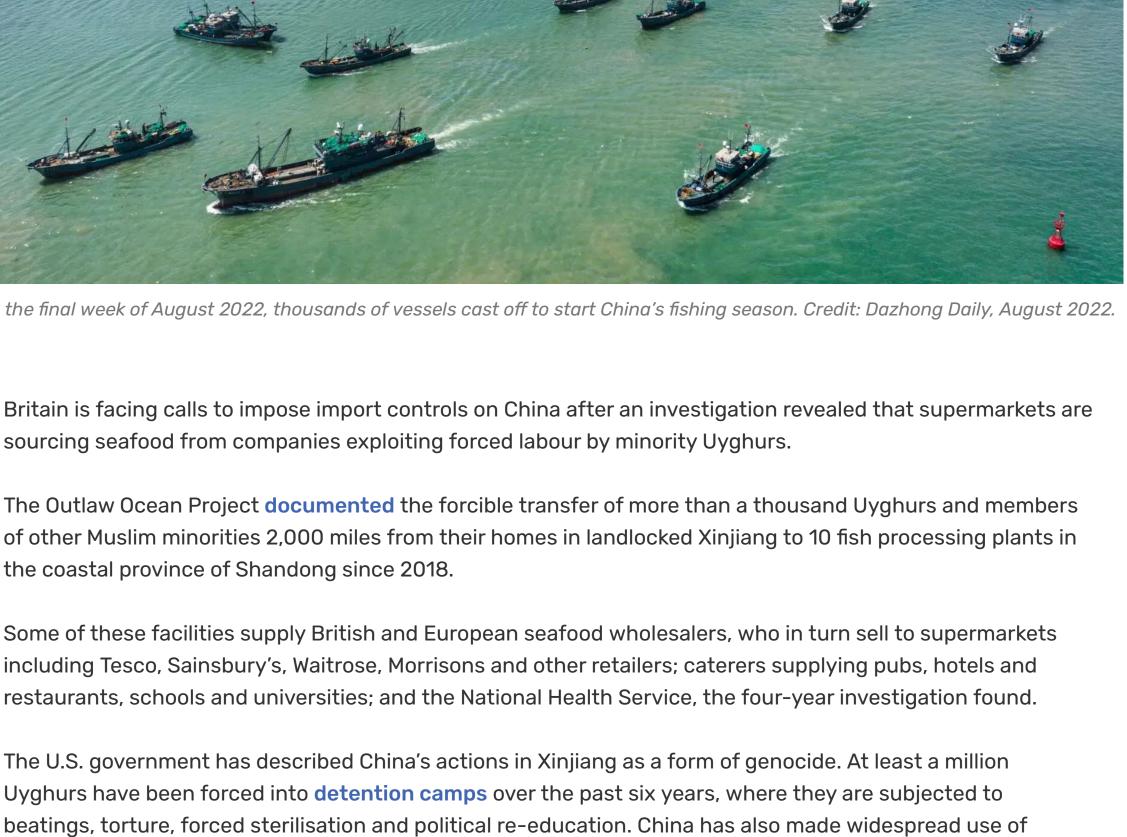
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To investigate the use of forced labour in opaque fish processing plants, The Outlaw Ocean Project hired

investigators to visit some of the sites, and reviewed local news reports; hundreds of pages of internal company newsletters; and thousands of social media videos showing Uyghur workers from Xinjiang, verified in

Workers in 2023 at a seafood plant called Yantai Sanko Fisheries in Shandong, which relies on Uyghur and other labour from Xinjiang and exports to the U.S., Canada, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands. Credit: Douyin/The Outlaw Ocean Project. The team also spent months investigating dire conditions in China's distant-water fishing fleet, following

deprivation of food and drinking water; and deaths from neglect or violence, affecting Chinese and foreign workers. The Outlaw Ocean Project also found that workers catching export-bound squid may be forced to stay offshore for more than three years, subjecting them to the risk of diseases such as beriberi, caused by a shortage of the vitamin B1 found in fresh fruits and vegetables, leading to some deaths.

platitudes."

"The battle must be fought with the same persistence and creativity that the Chinese government puts into avoiding international scrutiny of its use of Uyghur forced labour," he said. The UK Department of Business and Trade said the government was working with international partners to tackle the problem.

schools in England.

vessels with documented human rights abuses.

world, Thailand-based Charoen Pokphand Foods.

Pacific rockfish and shrimp globally.

Sainsbury's, Tesco and Waitrose.

'Horrified'

practice. "We continue to look into the issues raised by The Outlaw Ocean Project regarding seafood products stocked across UK supermarkets," a spokesperson said. Unibond Seafood International said it was "very surprised" to learn of allegations of forced labour against Qingdao Tianyuan, a Chinese processing plant that has used Uyghur forced labour since 2018, and as recently as 2023, according to the investigation. The company added that seafood from Qingdao Tianyuan accounted for a "negligible part" of its supply, and said it is committed to "sourcing products exclusively from suppliers that have been thoroughly vetted and approved by renowned international auditing bodies."

not respond to requests for comment.

Chinese goods made using forced labour.

China has transformed itself in recent decades into a seafood superpower, and as part of that effort it has moved significantly into South American waters. Credit: © The Outlaw Ocean Project/Photographer: Ed Ou, February 27, 2022.

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