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Conflicts - Tensions Northeast Asia

Human rights groups decry PRC's continued abuses

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North Korean defectors and human rights activists protest near the Chinese embassy in Seoul, South Korea, in September 2023 over the People's Republic of China's forced repatriation of North Korean escapees. IMAGE CREDIT: THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FORUM Staff

Human rights groups are reiterating concerns over the People's Republic of China's (PRC) treatment of Chinese citizens and those of other countries.

Organizations including Human Rights Watch (HRW), the United Nations Human Rights Office and Safeguard Defenders, a Madrid-based human rights organization, recently published reports covering a range of abuses, from “collective punishment” of Chinese citizens to funding the junta in Myanmar.

“Sinicizing” religions

HRW reported in November 2023 that Beijing continues to reduce the number of mosques in Ningxia and Gansu provinces as part of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) “mosque consolidation policy.” The CCP aims to restrict the practice of Islam by closing or demolishing mosques or converting them for secular use. Human rights advocates estimate the CCP has damaged or destroyed two-thirds of the mosques in Xinjiang province, which has the highest percentage of China's 20 million Muslims. More than 1,000 mosques in Gansu and Ningxia have been targeted. China had nearly 40,000 mosques in 2014, HRW reported.

The CCP claims the policy aims to “reduce the economic burden” on Muslims. In 2016, however, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping called for the Sinicization of religions, initiating a crackdown that had largely concentrated on the western region of Xinjiang, home to more than 11 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities. HRW said mosques that are not destroyed are modified to remove traditional Muslim architectural features and make the buildings look more Chinese. Some mosques have been outfitted with surveillance cameras, allowing the party-state to monitor attendance and flag individuals who have been prohibited from attending, including CCP members or their children. Many residents who have publicly opposed the Sinicization policies have been detained or jailed.

Forced repatriation to North Korea

In October 2023, a U.N. human rights committee released a statement urging the PRC to end forcible repatriation of North Korean escapees. The committee noted such repatriation violates the non-refoulement principle of international human rights law, which asserts that refugees should not be returned to a country where they would face cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment.

The U.N. called reports of forced repatriation by Beijing alarming, noting the majority of North Korean escapees returned are women, “despite appeals repeatedly made by multiple international human right bodies to refrain from doing so.” The committee said individuals repatriated to the North and labeled “traitors” may be subject to imprisonment without due process, enforced disappearance, torture and execution. Up to 600 North Koreans have vanished after being forcibly repatriated by the PRC, Reuters reported in December 2023.

Earlier in 2023, the U.N. committee wrote to the PRC requesting it end forced repatriations. In its response, the PRC claimed people fleeing North Korea are doing so for economic reasons and are considered illegal immigrants, not refugees, therefore the non-refoulement principle does not apply. Beijing also denied evidence of widespread torture in the North.

Funding the junta in Myanmar

A U.N. human rights committee published a September 2023 letter raising concerns over the PRC's forced eviction of Myanmar citizens as part of the Letpadaung copper mine expansion. The mine is a joint venture of Wanbao Mining Ltd., a subsidiary of a state-owned Chinese corporation, and entities controlled by Myanmar's junta, which toppled the nation's democratically elected government in a February 2021 coup.



Farmers near the Letpadaung copper mine in Myanmar protest the confiscation of their land in 2014. The People's Republic of China's Wanbao Mining Ltd. and the Myanmar junta jointly own the mine. IMAGE CREDIT: THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Wanbao seized farmland for the mine, part of the PRC's One Belt, One Road infrastructure scheme. The U.N. committee said it was troubled that Wanbao partnered with the junta despite knowing of its daily perpetration of grave human rights violations, war crimes and genocide.

Thousands of Myanmar residents nationwide have been forced from their villages by threat and coercion for mine construction and expansion. Junta forces have burned homes and relocated villagers without compensation to rebuild their homes and farms. The junta also restricts people from leaving their villages to get food and water.

The committee is also concerned about Wanbao's plans to resume operations at Letpadaung, which will provide direct revenue to the junta.

Forced labor at sea

The PRC is the world's worst abuser of forced labor in the seafood industry, with North Koreans, Uyghurs and others trapped into working aboard Chinese-flagged vessels and in Chinese-owned processing plants, according to recent reports.

“The country is largely unresponsive to international laws, and its fleet is the worst perpetrator of illegal fishing in the world, helping drive species to the brink of extinction,” The Outlaw Ocean Project, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit journalism organization, reported in October 2023. “Its ships are also rife with labor trafficking, debt bondage, violence, criminal neglect, and death.”

Vessels engaged in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing recruit workers from vulnerable and disadvantaged populations, potentially leading to human trafficking. About 128,000 fishers worldwide were trapped into forced labor aboard vessels, although that estimate “likely significantly understates the full extent of the problem,” the International Labour Organization reported in September 2022.

The U.N. agency and organizations such as the United States Agency for International Development seek to empower governments and companies to tackle such abuses, including with programs to track seafood products throughout the supply chain — sometimes known as “from bait to plate” — to ensure compliance with labor, customs and environmental regulations.

Collective punishment

Under Xi's rule, the CCP's use of collective punishment as a political tool has surged, according to a report from Safeguard Defenders. The tactic involves threatening or punishing the relatives or friends of individuals accused of a crime.

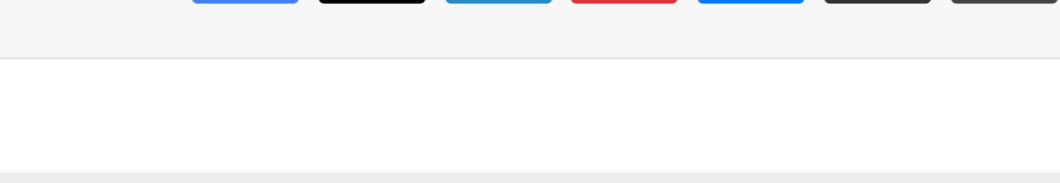
China outlawed collective punishment 100 years ago, but the CCP still uses it to target human rights defenders and their families, Safeguard Defenders reported. Punishment may include loss of income, home or education; prison; or involuntary commitment in a psychiatric hospital. Some cases have involved violence and death. As the CCP seeks to “persuade” Chinese nationals to return from other countries, relatives on the mainland are often targets.

Safeguard Defenders identified 50 cases of collective punishment from 2015-22 but believes many cases are unreported. Victims range from toddlers to the elderly.

In 2020, PRC officials retaliated against human rights activist Liu Sifang's family after he fled to the U.S. His wife and their 8-year-old son were forced from their home and the child was expelled from school. Police blocked mother and son from leaving the country for three years, forcing the couple to divorce so she could eventually move to Los Angeles to reunite.

“Those law enforcement officials, they used such cruel methods to retaliate against me because I managed to get out,” Liu told The Associated Press. “They are showing people like us that this is what we can do to you and your family.”

Tags: Burma / Myanmar DPRK / North Korea PRC / CCP Influence PRC / China



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