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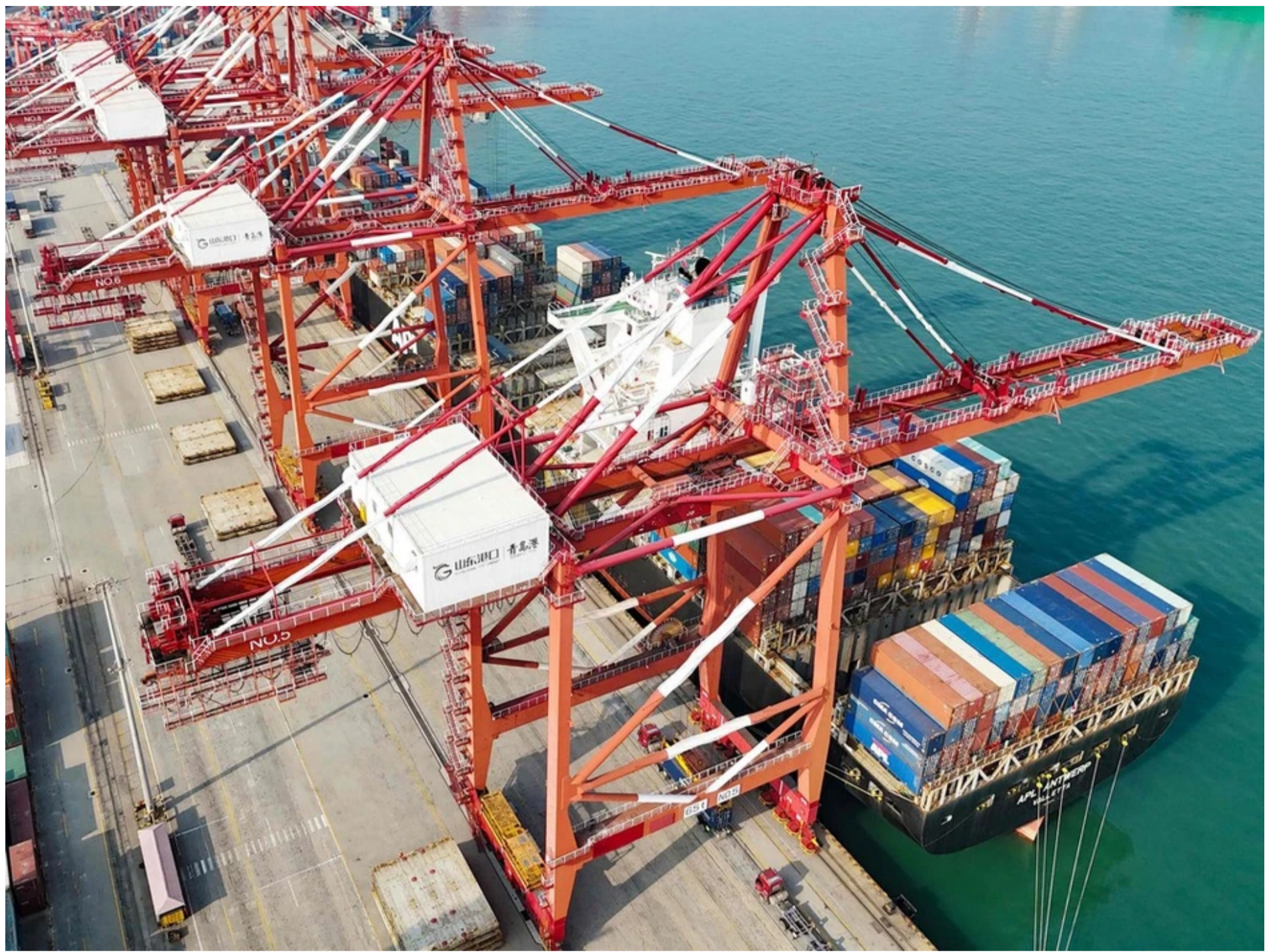
Teich and Tohti: Forced labour of Uyghurs taints the seafood industry too

Using slave labour, China's seafood-processing factories supply hundreds of restaurants, grocers and food service companies in Canada, the U.S. and elsewhere.

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This aerial photo taken on Oct. 13, 2023 shows cranes and shipping containers at Qingdao port in China's eastern Shandong province. Shandong is the country's most important fishing and seafood processing hub. PHOTO BY STR /AFP via Getty Images

It is a settled question that the Chinese Communist Party is committing mass atrocities and grave human rights violations against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang, a region known to Uyghurs as East Turkestan.

Arbitrary detentions of Uyghurs number in the millions; physical and sexual torture are widespread; forced labour is state-sponsored and extensive; and medical crimes are prevalent, including the forced sterilization of Uyghur women and girls. Governments and civil society institutions alike have found that the crimes committed against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims rise to the level of genocide.

The state-sponsored forced labour of Uyghurs taints the supply chains of at least several dozen multinational corporations. This has been well-researched in the garment industry, where numerous apparel giants have been implicated, including Nike and Zara. But Uyghur forced labour permeates numerous other industries, many of which are only recently coming to light.

One such industry: seafood.

A four-year investigation produced by The Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit journalism organization based in Washington, D.C., reveals the massive use of Uyghur forced labour in Chinese seafood processing plants and gross violations of human rights on fishing vessels. On the ships, labourers are held at sea for months on end, in horrendous conditions, and with lethal impact. On land, seafood processing plants use Uyghurs as forced labourers, which often involves their coerced transfer from the Uyghur region to the province of Shandong.

“*On the ships, labourers are held at sea for months on end, in horrendous conditions, and with lethal impact.*”

The Chinese Communist Party tries to pass these labour placements off as voluntary and in service of “poverty alleviation.” This has been effectively debunked by numerous researchers, including Prof. Laura Murphy and Dr. Adrian Zenz. As they and others have noted, the forced labour of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims must be examined in the context of the Chinese Communist Party’s overall campaign of repression and genocide. In this context, Uyghur forced labour is tantamount to modern-day slavery, because those who refuse a labour transfer placement face the risk of being penalized with arbitrary detention and torture.

The number of Uyghurs forced to labour in the seafood industry is significant. The Outlaw Ocean Project found that since 2018, at least 1,000 Uyghurs have been relocated to work in seafood-processing factories in Shandong province, the country’s most important fishing and seafood processing hub. In turn, these factories then supply hundreds of restaurants, grocers and food service companies in Canada, the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

Canada is particularly heavily impacted. Multiple Chinese companies that utilize Uyghur forced labour had, as their largest supplier, High Liner Foods, a Canadian-headquartered company that stocks the frozen aisles of numerous North American retailers including Walmart, Costco and Loblaws. The Outlaw Ocean Project released its findings last month and the company, which recently announced the resignation of its CEO, dropped one of the Chinese companies implicated. Meanwhile, multiple further links implicating Canadian companies remain, and this likely represents just the tip of the iceberg.

Canada should take decisive action.

In contrast with the United States’ Custom and Border Protection, which has seized thousands of shipments from China believed to have been made using forced labour, Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) has not effectively stopped a single one.

CBSA’s demonstrated incapacity to effectively prevent goods made using Uyghur forced labour from entering the country must be addressed, in the seafood industry and beyond. Canada has various tools available at its disposal; it is simply not using them. For instance, in response to the pervasiveness of Uyghur forced labour in the seafood industry in China, a policy may be implemented that imports from Chinese seafood companies be presumed made using Uyghur forced labour. CBSA has argued in Federal Court that it does not have the power to implement these sorts of presumptions — but has suggested that Global Affairs Canada may do so. Alternatively, or in addition, targeted sanctions should be implemented.

Regardless of approach, it is clear that something must be done. Canada may not be empowered to stop a genocide of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims that is happening across the world. But we can and should ensure that we are not complicit, and that products made using the forced labour of genocide victims do not reach Canadian shelves.

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