OUTLAW OCEAN

China's little-known system of forced Uyghur labour gives the world much of its seafood

An investigation by The Outlaw Ocean Project found that at least 10 large seafood companies in China have used more than a thousand Uyghur labourers since 2018

IAN URBINA
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HANDOUT

This story was published in co-ordination with The Outlaw Ocean Project, a non-profit journalism organization in Washington. Reporting and writing was contributed by Ian Urbina, Daniel Murphy, Joe Galvin, Maya Martin, Susan Ryan, Austin Brush and Jake Conley.

On a cloudy morning this past April, more than 80 men and women, dressed in matching red windbreakers, stood in orderly lines in front of the train station in the city of Kashgar, in China's northwestern Xinjiang region.

They were members of the country's Uyghur ethnic minority, a largely Muslim group that makes up more than half the population in Xinjiang. They stood, with suitcases at their feet, watching a farewell ceremony held in their honour by the local government. A video of the event shows a woman in traditional dress pirouetting on a stage. A banner reads, "Promote mass employment and build societal harmony." At the end of the video, drone footage zooms out to show trains waiting to take the group away.

A video uploaded to a Chinese government Douyin account in 2023 captures a labour transfer organized by the Kashgar authorities.

KASHGAR MEDIA CENTER VIA DOUYIN

The event was part of a vast labour transfer program run by the Chinese state, which forcibly sends Uyghurs to different parts of China and puts them to work for major industries. “It’s a strategy of control and assimilation,” Adrian Zenz, an anthropologist who studies internment in Xinjiang, said. “And it’s designed to eliminate Uyghur culture.”

The program is part of a wider agenda intended to subjugate a historically restive people. Uyghur separatists revolted throughout the 1990s and bombed police stations in 2008 and 2014. China began the labour transfers in the early 2000s as part of a broad system of persecution that has also included mass arrests and the use of “re-education” camps, where torture, beatings and forced sterilization have been documented. In Canada, the House of Commons passed a resolution in 2021 describing China’s actions against Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims as a form of genocide.

Many countries, including Canada, have introduced legislation designed to curb imports of goods produced with forced labour in Xinjiang and other locations. But one sector using transferred workers from Xinjiang has largely escaped notice: the seafood industry.

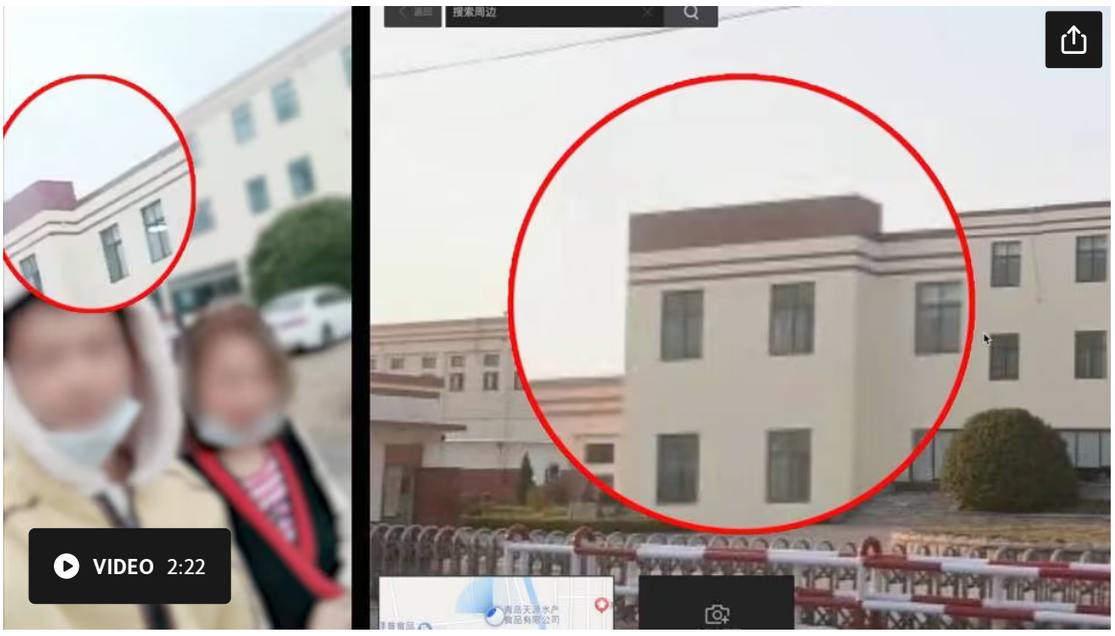
A video from Chinese social media shows the working conditions at a seafood plant called Yantai Sanko Fisheries in Shandong Province, China, which relies on Uyghur and other labour from Xinjiang and exports to the U.S., Canada, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands.
DOUYIN

China accounted for about $520-million of Canada’s seafood imports in 2021, making it this country’s second-largest supplier after the U.S. But the many hand-offs between fishing boats, processing plants and exporters make it difficult for countries to track the precise origins of the seafood they import. Foreign journalists also tend to be forbidden from freely reporting in Xinjiang, and censors scrub the Chinese internet of critical and non-official content about Uyghur labour.

Reporters from The Outlaw Ocean Project spent the past four years conducting an extensive investigation into the little-known system of forced Uyghur labour that gives the world much of its seafood.

To verify the locations of seafood processing plants that are using forced Uyghur labour, the project’s researchers reviewed hundreds of pages of internal company newsletters, local news reports, trade data, cellphone imagery and a database of Uyghur testimonies. They also watched thousands of videos uploaded to the internet, mostly to Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, and verified that the posters had initially registered in Xinjiang. Additionally, they asked specialists to review the languages used in the videos and hired investigators to visit some of the plants.

All of the available evidence reviewed by The Outlaw Ocean Project points toward a deeply troubling situation. “This discovery about seafood and the reach of the labour-transfer program,” said Sarah Teich, a lawyer who deals with Uyghur labour issues, “ties the Uyghur abuses to consumers globally.”



To prove the presence of workers from Xinjiang province at seafood processing plants, the team at The Outlaw Ocean Project reviewed social media footage matching landmarks and signs at Chinese seafood processing plants that use state-sponsored forced labour. Xinjiang province is home to many members of the country’s ethnic minority including Uyghurs.

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Between 2014 and 2019, according to Chinese government statistics, Chinese authorities annually relocated more than 10 per cent of Xinjiang’s population – or two and a half million people – through labour transfers. The effect was enormous:

between 2017 and 2019, according to the government statistics, birth rates in Xinjiang declined by almost half.

The transferred Uyghurs have been put to work not only processing seafood, but also harvesting cotton, digging in polysilicate mines and producing textiles and solar panels. (Officials at China's foreign affairs ministry did not respond to questions about the program.)

Shandong Province, a major seafood-processing hub along the eastern coast of China, is more than a thousand miles away from Xinjiang – which may have helped it evade scrutiny. "It's door-to-door," Mr. Zenz said. "They literally get delivered from the collection points in Xinjiang to the factory."

These transfers usually start with a knock on the door. Then a "village work team" made up of local Communist Party officials enters a household and engages in "thought work," which involves urging Uyghurs to join government programs, sometimes including relocations.

The official narrative suggests Uyghur workers are grateful for employment opportunities, and some likely are. But a classified internal directive from Kashgar Prefecture's Stability Maintenance Command, written in 2017, notes that people who resist work transfers can be punished with detention.

According to Mr. Zenz, a woman from Kashgar who refused a factory assignment because she had to take care of two small children was detained as a result. Another woman who refused a transfer was put in a cell for "non-co-operation."

Ethnic minority workers at Yantai Sanko Fisheries Co. Ltd. attend political education sessions at the factory in 2021, a common component of China's state-imposed forced labour system.

YANTAI UNITED FRONT WORK DEPARTMENT VIA THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

After recruits are rounded up, they get their placements. This past February, thousands of Uyghurs were lined up next to an internment camp in southern Xinjiang for a "job fair." A video of a similar event shows them signing contracts, monitored by officials in army fatigues. Some transfers are carried out by train or plane.

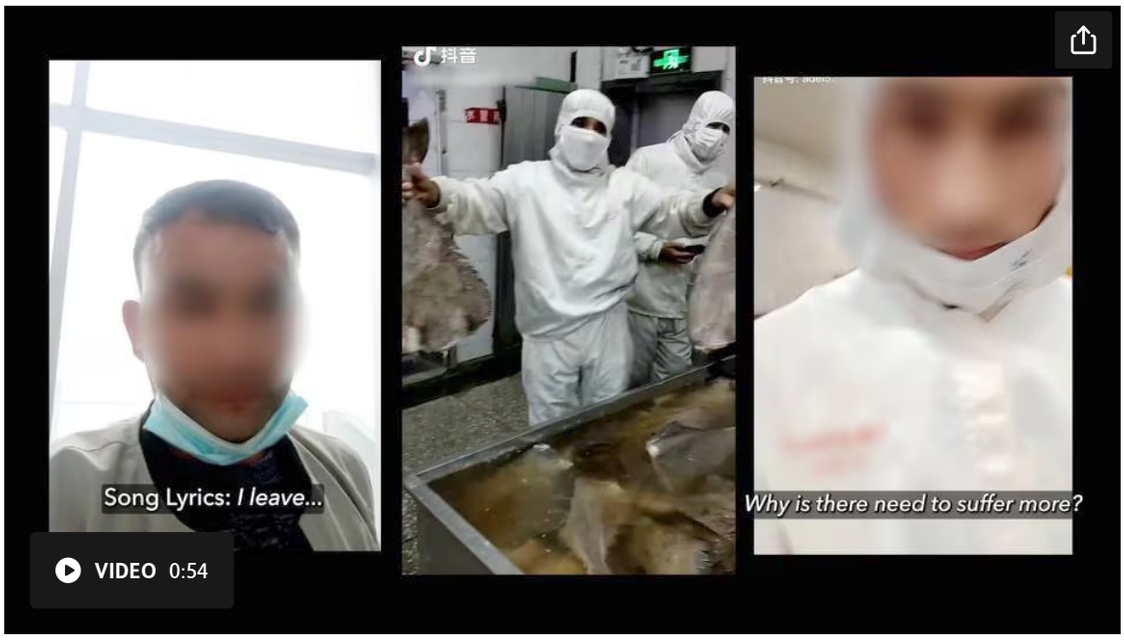
Xinjiang Zhongtai Group, a Fortune 500 conglomerate primarily operating in chemicals and textiles, recently organized the transfer of 100,000 workers to Hotan prefecture. Zhongtai did not respond to requests for comment for this article.

Sometimes, transfers are motivated by labour demands. In March, 2020, the Chishan Group, one of China's largest seafood catching and processing companies, published an internal newsletter describing what it called the "huge production pressure" caused by the pandemic.

That October, party officials from the local anti-terrorist detachment of China's public security bureau and the country's human resources and social security bureau, which handles work transfers, met twice with executives to discuss how to find the company additional labour, according to company newsletters.

Soon after, Chishan agreed to accelerate transfers to its plants. Wang Shanqiang, the deputy general manager at Chishan, said in a corporate newsletter, "The company looks forward to the migrant workers from Xinjiang arriving soon."

The Chishan Group did not respond to requests for comment.



Analysis of social media posts by Uyghur seafood processing workers reveal how their posts may convey cryptic messages to side-step Chinese censors like these videos posted on Douyin, China's version of TikTok. Some post Uyghur songs with mournful lyrics in their videos and others express their unhappiness in slightly less veiled terms.

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Because the Uyghurs sent to factories are monitored closely, one of the few ways to get a peek into their lives is through the images and videos they post on social media. Many take selfies by the water when they first arrive in Shandong. Xinjiang is the farthest place on Earth from the ocean.

Some post Uyghur songs with mournful lyrics in their videos. These lyrics could mean nothing, but according to Yalkun Uluyol, a researcher at Koç University, in Istanbul, at times they may convey cryptic messages designed to bypass Chinese censors.

Examples abound:

One middle-aged Uyghur man, on his way to work in a Shandong seafood plant, filmed himself sitting in an airport departure lounge in March, 2022, and set the footage to the song *Kitermenghu* (I Shall Leave). He cuts away just before lines that anybody familiar with the song would know, including: “Now we have an enemy, you should be careful.”

In a slide show, workers are shown packing seafood into cardboard boxes while a voiceover says, “The greatest joy in life is to defeat an enemy who is many times stronger than you, and who has oppressed you, discriminated against you, and humiliated you.”

In some videos, workers express their unhappiness in slightly less veiled terms. One video shows two Uyghur men working on a fish-packing line in a seafood plant.

“How much do you get paid in a month?” one man asks the other.

“Three thousand,” the second responds.

“Then why are you still not happy?”

“Because I have no choice.”

Using cell phone footage from within the plants, trade data, on-site surveillance teams, and company documents, the investigation takes the world inside Chinese seafood processing plants that use state-sponsored forced labour. Thousands of Uyghur workers from the province of Xinjiang in China are being forced by the state to work in seafood processing plants that supply many of the major grocery stores and restaurants across the U.S. and Europe.

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Seafood supply chains are notoriously difficult to penetrate. To detect forced labour, companies tend to rely on private firms that conduct “social audits,” in which inspectors visit factories to make sure they comply with international labour standards.

But social audits are typically announced in advance, which allows managers to hide minority workers during inspections. Even when workers are interviewed, they are often reluctant to be candid, for fear of retribution. When Sarosh Kuruvilla, a professor of industrial relations at Cornell, analyzed more than 40,000 audits from around the world, he found that almost half were unreliable. “The tool is completely broken,” he said.

In May, 2022, social auditors from SGS, one of the top auditing firms, toured the

Haibo seafood processing factory, in Shandong, and found no evidence of forced labour. But when The Outlaw Ocean Project investigated the matter, it found that more than 170 people from Xinjiang worked at Haibo in 2021. On the same day the auditors toured, a young Uyghur worker posted pictures of herself near the plant's dormitories and loading bays.

"We are a company run in accordance to the law and regulations," Liu Wei, a representative from the Haibo plant, said in an e-mail.

This was not an isolated incident. During the investigation, reporters found other examples of Uyghurs who had posted pictures of themselves at factories within days of those plants being cleared by social audits. Reporters also found that half of the Chinese exporters they had identified as being tied to Uyghur labour had passed audits by leading global inspection firms.

Many companies that are certified as "sustainable" are implicated. All the seafood plants that The Outlaw Ocean Project found to be using forced labour from Xinjiang were certified by the Marine Stewardship Council.

Jo Miller, the MSC's head of public relations, acknowledged that the company is reliant on social audits, which have "significant limitations."

Yantai Sanko Fisheries in Shandong Province, China, relies on Uyghur and other labour from Xinjiang and exports to the U.S., Canada, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands.

DOUYIN

"We worked yesterday. Worked last night. We are still working," a Uyghur man employed at Yantai Sanko Fisheries says in social media video showing exhausted workers.

DOUYIN

The investigation found that at least 10 large seafood companies in China have used more than a thousand Uyghur labourers since 2018. During that time, those companies shipped more than 47,000 tons of seafood to the United States. Seafood from these plants was bought by North American importers, among them High Liner Foods, which is based in Nova Scotia.

Jennifer Bell, the vice-president of communications for High Liner Foods, said that the plant it worked with had undergone a third-party audit in September, 2022.

In October of this year, a day after The Outlaw Ocean Project first published its findings, High Liner confirmed it was “no longer doing business with Yantai Sanko Fisheries,” a seafood processor in Shandong that the investigation found was using labour from Xinjiang.

Canada amended its Customs Tariff Act in 2020 to prohibit imports of goods produced with forced labour. But the measure is far weaker than a law passed in the United States in 2021, which says that all products produced “wholly or in part” by workers from Xinjiang should be presumed to have been made with state-imposed forced labour, and that those products are therefore banned from the U.S. market.

As of August, the Canada Border Services Agency had not successfully intercepted a single shipment of goods thought to have been made with forced labour.

Robert Stumberg, a law professor at Georgetown University, said that the U.S. law on Uyghur labour is “distinctly powerful” and that the U.S. government has already enforced it for solar panels, auto parts, computer chips, palm oil, sugar and tomatoes. To him, it’s obvious what now has to happen.

“Seafood,” he said, “should be next.”

China's seafood fishing fleet is more than double that of its next competitor. How did they become so big and should the world care? The Outlaw Ocean Project produced a four-year investigation of forced labour and other crimes tied to the Chinese fleet and the world’s seafood supply.

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351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

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