Uighur Crisis of China

Why in news?

A set of government documents on treatment of Uighur Muslims by China was leaked in The New York Times newspaper.

Who are Uighur Muslims?

- Xinjiang is the far west of China, and is the country's biggest region and rich in minerals.
- It is bordered by several countries, including India, Afghanistan and Mongolia.
- For centuries, the economy of Xinjiang has centered on agriculture and trade, and towns thrived because they were on the Silk Road.
- Like Tibet, it is an autonomous region, and it has a degree of self-governance away from Beijing.
- The Uighurs are mostly Muslims, and number about 11 million in northwestern part of China’s Xinjiang region.
- They see themselves as culturally and ethnically close to Central Asian nations, and their language is similar to Turkish.

What are the issues faced by Uighurs in China?

- In recent decades, there are mass migration of Han Chinese (China's ethnic majority) to Xinjiang, and the Uighurs feel their culture and livelihoods are under threat.
- Around a million Uighurs, Kazakhs and other Muslims have been bundled into internment camps, where they are allegedly being schooled into giving up their identity, and assimilate better in the communist country dominated by the Han Chinese.
- Children have been separated from their parents, families torn apart, an entire population kept under surveillance and cut off from the rest of the world.
- The few survivors who have managed to escape the country have been reported to speak of physical, mental and sexual torture at these camps.

Why is China targeting the Uighurs?

- The Uighurs are Muslim, they don't speak Mandarin as their native language, and have ethnicity and culture that is different from that of mainland China.
- Over the past few decades, as economic prosperity has come to Xinjiang, it has brought with it in large numbers the majority Han Chinese, who have cornered the better jobs, and left the Uighurs feeling their livelihoods and identity were under threat.
- This led to sporadic violence, in 2009 culminating in a riot that killed 200 people, mostly Han Chinese, in the region's capital Urumqi.
- The government had anyway been cracking down on the Uighurs. After this spell of violence, retaliation hardened.
- With terror attacks in other parts of the world and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, a local militancy was viewed as something that could grow into a terrorist-secessionist force, determined to break away from China to form an independent "East Turkestan".
- The Chinese policy from here on seems to have been one of treating the entire community as suspect, and launching a systematic project to chip away at every marker of a distinct Uighur identity.

What does the documents leaked in NYT contain?

- According to The New York Times, the leaked papers consist of 24 documents, which "include nearly 200 pages of internal speeches by Xi and other leaders and more than 150 pages of directives and reports on the surveillance and control of the Uighur population in Xinjiang.
- There are also references to plans to extend restrictions on Islam to other parts of China.
- People could be sent to the government's "deradicalisation camps" for showing any signs of extremism, with the government deciding what was "extremism" - sporting beards, fasting during Ramzan, dressing differently from the majority, sending Eid greetings, praying "too often", giving up smoking and drinking, or not knowing Mandarin.
- Contacting people outside China is one of the surest ways to be sent to a camp.
- In three years, the government is estimated to have put one million people in the "re-education" camps, making them leave behind their jobs, property and their children.
- Because the inmates have not been charged for any crime, there is no question of a legal fight against their detention.
- The government has put in place a surveillance system that includes face

recognition cameras, software to monitor Uighurs' phone activities, QR codes on homes that tell authorities how many members are inside the house, QR codes on any domestic tool that can be used as a weapon, such as a knife.
- The government claims it is providing the inmates vocational skills, but many of those detained are professors, doctors, skilled professionals, so it is not clear what are these "skills" are supposed to achieve.

What is China's stand on the issue?

- China resolutely denies all such allegations, claiming the camps to be 'educational centres' where the Uighurs are being cured of "extremist thoughts" and radicalisation, and learning vocational skills.
- Over the past year, Turkey has spoken up for the Uighurs, and the United Nations and the United States have made some noise.
- China has maintained it is only de-radicalising some of its errant citizenry, and has asked the world to "respect its sovereignty" in dealing with its internal matters.
- According statements of Chinese officials, Xinjiang has seen dramatic changes: Peace, prosperity and tourism are back.
- Xinjiang borders Pakistan and Afghanistan, China's de-radicalization efforts have made Xinjiang different from them.

Source: Indian Express

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