

ASIA PACIFIC / SCIENCE &amp; HEALTH

## Exiled Uighurs fear spread of coronavirus in China camps

AFP-JIJI

FEB 13, 2020

**PARIS** – Members of China’s Uighur minority living in exile are sounding the alarm over the risk of the coronavirus spreading in camps inside the country, where NGOs say hundreds of thousands of people have been rounded up by Beijing.

So far, official figures released by Chinese state media give no major cause for concern over the COVID-19 outbreak in the northeastern region of Xinjiang that is home to the Uighurs, a Muslim minority who speak a Turkic language.

It is far from the epicenter of the outbreak and just 55 cases have been reported in the region so far. The first patients to fully recover in the region have already left the hospital, according to official media.

Over 1,100 people have died in China due to the coronavirus epidemic although most of the deaths and infections have been in the central Hubei province, whose capital, Wuhan, is the epicenter of the outbreak.

But representatives of the Uighur diaspora warn there is real reason to fear a rapid spread of coronavirus in the controversial Chinese camps.

The virus spreads from person to person through droplets disseminated by sneezing or coughing, and confining large groups of people together, possibly without adequate access to germ-killing soap and water, will increase the likelihood of an outbreak.

China has rounded up an estimated 1 million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim ethnic minorities in internment camps, NGOs and experts say, and little is known about the conditions inside them.

Beijing insists the camps are “vocational training centers” necessary to combat terrorism.

“People are starting to panic. Our families are there, dealing with the camps and the virus, and we do not know if they have enough to eat or if they have masks,” said Dilnur Reyhan, a French sociologist of Uighur origin.

A petition posted on [Change.org](http://Change.org) (<http://Change.org>) signed by over 3,000 people urges the closure of the camps to reduce the threat.

There have also been social media hashtag campaigns such as #VirusThreatInThecamps and #WHO2Urumqi to urge the World Health Organization (WHO) to send a delegation to the city of Xinjiang.

“We must not wait until news of hundreds of coronavirus related deaths in the camps before we react,” the petition says.

“As China continues to struggle to contain the virus in Wuhan, we can easily assume the virus will rapidly spread throughout the camps and affect millions if we don’t raise the alarm now.”

Regional authorities in Xinjiang did not respond to a query from AFP about measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus in the camps.

The World Uyghur Congress (WUC), one of several groups representing Uighurs outside China, said it was very concerned “that if measures are not taken to further limit the spread of this virus, it could rapidly infect large numbers of people” in Xinjiang.

“These people are in a vulnerable and weakened state due to the Chinese government’s abuses and mistreatment,” said its president, Dolkun Isa.

“This has just further compounded the suffering of the Uighur people, as our friends and family are now in even greater danger.”

French immunologist Norbert Gualde said it was impossible to say “precisely under what conditions the Uighurs and other detainees are living in Chinese camps.”

“There are good reasons to think that their detention is synonymous with imposed promiscuity, stress and fear — all circumstances that favor the transmission of a virus between those obliged to remain incarcerated,” he said.

### **Your news needs your support**

Since the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis, The Japan Times has been providing free access to crucial news on **the impact of the novel coronavirus** ([https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/covid-19-in-japan/?utm\\_source=jto&utm\\_medium=box&utm\\_campaign=need%20your%20support](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/covid-19-in-japan/?utm_source=jto&utm_medium=box&utm_campaign=need%20your%20support)) as well as practical information about **how to cope with the pandemic** ([https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/stayhome/?utm\\_source=jto&utm\\_medium=box&utm\\_campaign=need%20your%20support](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/tag/stayhome/?utm_source=jto&utm_medium=box&utm_campaign=need%20your%20support)). Please consider **subscribing today** ([https://www.japantimes.co.jp/sub/?utm\\_source=jto&utm\\_medium=box&utm\\_campaign=need%20your%20support](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/sub/?utm_source=jto&utm_medium=box&utm_campaign=need%20your%20support)) so we can continue offering you up-to-date, in-depth news about Japan.



[\(https://www.japantimes.co.jp/liveblogs/news/coronavirus-outbreak-updates/\)](https://www.japantimes.co.jp/liveblogs/news/coronavirus-outbreak-updates/)