

# UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT SPECIAL REPORT

## The 2022 Winter Olympics and Beijing's Uyghur Policy: Sports in the Shadows of Concentration Camps

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*Celebration of 1,000 days until the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics © china.org.cn*

The 2022 Olympic Winter Games, if held in China, will boost exchanges and mutual understanding between the Chinese and other civilizations of the world, encourage more than 1.3 billion Chinese to engage in winter sports with interest and passion, and give them yet another opportunity to help advance the Olympic movement and promote the Olympic spirit.

— Xi Jinping, Chinese Communist Party Chairman<sup>1</sup>

FIFPro is concerned about the reported detention of one of China's most promising young footballers. Erfan Hezim was reportedly taken to a "political re-education camp" in February for "visiting foreign countries" when he returned home from a trip to Spain and Dubai. The 19-year-old striker — also known as Ye Erfan — last year signed a 5-year contract with Chinese Super League team Jiangsu Suning. The young footballer is a Uyghur, a Turkish ethnic group in China which Human Rights Watch says is closely monitored by Chinese authorities.

— International Federation of Professional Footballers<sup>2</sup>

# Table of Contents

Executive Summary..... 3

The Olympic Games and the Chinese Communist Party..... 5

2022 Olympics and Uyghur Concentration Camps: Shredding the Olympic Charter..... 8

Policy Recommendations.....10

References..... 13

## I. Executive Summary

Awarding the right to host the Olympic Games to the People's Republic of China has long been a controversial issue, due to the PRC Party-state's resistance to international standards on basic human rights. Two core arguments have been put forward to encourage awarding the Games to the PRC: 1) hosting the Olympics will help produce a more open China that abides by international standards on human rights, and 2) the chance to host the Olympics is deeply meaningful to the people and the government of China.

The 2008 Beijing Olympics and the decade of political retrogression that have followed it have thoroughly disproven the claim that hosting the Olympics could improve the rights situation in China: in fact, the 2008 Olympics appear to have only given the regime more confidence that it can maintain an oppressive and unaccountable system yet still be embraced by the world. However, precisely because the Olympics are indeed so significant for the regime and the country as a whole, the Games are today one of the few entry points for an increasingly concerned global community to apply pressure on the Chinese state.

Soon after the 2015 decision to award Beijing the rights to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, Beijing's policy in Xinjiang took a dark and disturbing turn with the establishment of a network of concentration camps arbitrarily and indefinitely holding Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims. Enacting generalized racial profiling, inmates are detained not due to any crime, but solely due to their ethnicity: guilt is presumed for anyone of Uyghur, Kazakh, or other Turkic backgrounds. Inmates in these camps are pressured, under the constant monitoring of guards, to abandon their religious beliefs and cultural practices. They are indoctrinated with Party-state propaganda and forced to sing songs of praise for the Chinese Communist Party and its current Chairman, Xi Jinping.

The Olympic Charter lists as one of the movement's goals "the preservation of human dignity." Such policies of racial profiling and arbitrary detention should not be in place in any country participating in the Olympic movement, much less a country hosting the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee and the global community should not allow the Olympic Games to be used as a promotional celebration for a dictatorial regime holding millions in concentration camps based on their ethnicity. It is thus well past time for the international community to use the real leverage of the Olympics to push for change in China's policy.

We call on the International Olympic Committee to:

- Immediately inform China that its policies in Xinjiang are in violation of the ideals of the Olympic Charter
- Make use of the IOC's recently established Advisory Commission on Human Rights to announce that if these policies do not change, the IOC will no longer be able to cooperate with Beijing in planning for the 2022 Games and will immediately seek an alternate location.

We call on national Olympic committees and political leaders of countries around the world to:

- Inform the IOC that current policies in Xinjiang are incompatible with the Olympic Charter, and inform China that participation in the 2022 Olympic Games is not feasible without substantial change in Xinjiang.
- Refuse to participate in the Games if current policies remain unchanged: camps need to be verified as closed, while profiling and cultural repression must end.
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We call on the general public to:

- Sign the “No Rights, No Games 2022” petition urging the International Olympic Committee to take action to ensure that the Games are not held in a country holding millions in concentration camps.
- Clearly voice opposition to current Chinese government policies in Xinjiang to the International Olympic Committee, national Olympic committees, governments, and advertising sponsors of the 2022 Winter Games.
- Ensure that the concentration camp system and broader policies of repression in Xinjiang are a central topic of discussion and reporting at any Olympics-related event in the coming years, including the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.
- Refuse to attend the 2022 Games if the Games continue with current policies in place.
- Boycott corporate sponsors if the Games continue with current policies in place.

## II. The Olympic Games and the Chinese Communist Party

Awarding the Olympic Games to the People's Republic of China has been a deeply controversial and hotly debated issue since the country's first Olympic bid in 1993. Just four years after People's Liberation Army soldiers shot their way through the streets of the capital in the Tiananmen Massacre of 1989, the implications of awarding this global event to Beijing, and by extension to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that oversaw this slaughter, were all too obvious.<sup>3</sup> The opportunity to host the Games would present the People's Republic of China, and by extension the Party that rules over it, as a major player on the world stage worthy of recognition and respect. Such international normalization and indeed celebration of the Party-state would in turn have very real implications for the Party's domestic legitimacy, presenting the CCP as the sole party capable of finally recapturing the country's perceived proper place in the global hierarchy.

Yet it is precisely the legitimacy that the Olympic Games would provide to the Party-state, the source of international concern, that has made the chance to host the Games so alluring to the CCP. Sports diplomacy has been a core component of Beijing's post-1989 soft power drive to normalize a political system that goes directly against global trends of democratization, accountability, and human rights. This determination has paid off, with the International Olympic Committee awarding the Games to the PRC Party-state twice: first for the Beijing Summer Olympics of 2008, and again for the Beijing-Zhangjiakou Winter Olympics of 2022.

Of course, the Party-state has not openly acknowledged that it uses the Olympics for purposes of legitimization. Advocates have instead put forward two main arguments to support awarding the Games to Beijing.

The first argument claims that hosting the Games will help to promote the causes of political openness and human rights in China. In February 2001, Beijing's deputy mayor Liu Jingmin told the *Washington Post*, "by applying for the Olympics, we want to promote not just the city's development, but the development of society, including democracy and human rights."<sup>4</sup> Because the Olympic Games mean that China will host athletes, journalists, and visitors from around the world as "guests," this narrative claims, this globalizing experience will naturally lead to a more open and democratic China. Liu continued, "Eight years is a long time... If people have a target like the Olympics to strive for, it will help us establish a more just and harmonious society, a more democratic society, and help integrate China into the world."<sup>5</sup> There are indeed significant historical examples from the East Asia region to support this argument: the international spotlight on South Korea as the 1988 Seoul Games approached seems to have been significant in shaping the leadership's decision to finally pursue substantial constitutional reform and democratization.<sup>6</sup>

A second argument, appealing more to emotion than reason, claims that the PRC is an ideal choice to host the Olympics because the Games are so meaningful to "the Chinese people."<sup>7</sup> This discourse borrows from the "century of humiliation" narrative at the core of modern Han Chinese nationalism to argue that a once proud China has found itself oppressed by the Western powers and excluded from its proper place in global affairs in the modern era. Inculcated for decades through state media and the state educational system's patriotic indoctrination program, this narrative maintains a hegemonic position in China today; at the same time, conforming to a

standard understanding of imperialism as something that “the West” alone did to “the East” as a singular collective victim, this narrative also has widespread resonance internationally. Granting the Olympics to China then provides a redeeming opportunity to cast off past indignities and embrace the country’s resurgence on the global stage.

The first argument, an Olympic version of the “China fantasy” that economic liberalization and exchange with the world naturally leads toward political openness,<sup>8</sup> has by now been thoroughly disproven: the 2008 Beijing Games did not bring about “a more just and harmonious society” nor “a more democratic society.” Although Beijing made a number of promises in the years preceding the Games, these promises did not translate into real change: advertised protest zones were left empty,<sup>9</sup> Internet blocks remained in place,<sup>10</sup> millions were evicted,<sup>11</sup> with Uyghurs in particular being racially targeted for monitoring and removal,<sup>12</sup> political activists were forcefully removed from the capital,<sup>13</sup> reporters were blocked from reporting,<sup>14</sup> and a vicious crackdown on the Tibetan plateau and beyond<sup>15</sup> was implemented in the name of “stability” for a successful Olympics.

The Olympics furthermore did not leave even a hint of any legacy of openness in its wake: after the 2008 Games concluded, the Party-state’s Internet censorship and restrictions on reporting only expanded further, including a ten-month closure of Internet access to all of Xinjiang,<sup>16</sup> people with different political opinions faced ever greater pressures, a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate was held in prison until his early death for speech crimes,<sup>17</sup> hundreds of human rights lawyers working within the system for peaceful law-based change were arbitrarily detained and tortured,<sup>18</sup> hundreds of people in Greater Tibet set their bodies on fire in protest against the crackdown in this region,<sup>19</sup> and this crackdown with its curtailment of even the most basic of freedoms expanded into the nearby Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Rather than producing a more open and democratic China, our “Beijing Olympic fantasy,” the 2008 Games only made the Chinese Party-state ever more confident that it would not only not have to pay a price for continuing to deny the people of China basic rights, but could even be accepted as a major stakeholder in the global community.<sup>20</sup>

The second argument, however, about the deep importance of these mega-events to the Chinese state, remains true, as can be seen from Beijing’s already eager preparations for and promotion of the 2022 Olympics. Although the importance of the Games to China is often used to encourage awarding the Games to Beijing, suggesting that the host will make the most of this opportunity, another reading is possible, and indeed at this point necessary: if Beijing cares so deeply about this international event, the right to host the Games can also be used to apply pressure on the Chinese Party-state to accord with basic international standards of human rights. Rather than the CCP using the international community gathering for the Games for purposes of domestic legitimization, can the Games instead be used by the concerned international community to press for real domestic change? Such an effort would be ground-breaking because the international community today has very few tools through which to effectively apply pressure on the Chinese state and its policies, even as these policies become ever more regressive and troubling.

In sum, the Olympics have not contributed to a more open and democratic China, as many had hoped (and as Beijing had promised). Rather, the Games have given the Party-state more confidence that it can maintain a closed political system, even backtracking on promises of opening, yet still be embraced by the world and thereby legitimized at home. This cycle needs to be reversed:

precisely because the Olympics and other mega-events have been so essential to the Chinese Party-state's image management, the Games, with all of their symbolic weight, remain one of the few points of entry for the global community to apply pressure on the CCP.

It is now well past time for the international community to use this leverage to push for change in China, as preparations for the 2022 Olympics in Beijing proceed alongside the expansion of a network of concentration camps in Xinjiang.

### III. The 2022 Olympics and Uyghur Concentration Camps: Shredding the Olympic Charter

In July of 2015, the 128<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Olympic Committee awarded the 2022 Winter Olympics to the cities of Beijing and nearby Zhangjiakou, Hebei Province. In a growing trend of public concern about the significant costs of hosting the Games, numerous cities chose to withdraw their bids prior to the final vote, leaving two final contestants: Beijing, the capital of the People’s Republic of China and Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan.<sup>21</sup> In the final vote, Beijing won by four ballots, making it the first city in history to host both the Summer and Winter Olympics.

As preparations for the 2022 Games proceeded, on the other side of China, preparations of a far different type were underway. Within a year of the IOC decision, Chen Quanguo was appointed Party Secretary of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region: Chen is a hardliner who oversaw unrelenting suppression in Tibet after protests in the run-up to the 2008 Olympics, and his transfer was clearly intended to draw upon his experience there to pacify another increasingly tense region.<sup>22</sup> On the model of “the grid,” an all-encompassing new security arrangement that had brought a veneer of stability to Tibet,<sup>23</sup> tens of thousands of new security personnel were recruited, checkpoints were established throughout the region, constant security patrols were put in place, and intrusive forms of surveillance monitored the most intimate details of daily life in Xinjiang in real time.<sup>24</sup>

As disturbing as this all was, it was not completely unexpected: the world had already watched as this new surveillance state was built in Tibet. By 2017, however, Beijing’s Xinjiang policy moved in a horrific new direction that not even the most pessimistic analysts had predicted, developing a network of concentration camps in the region, capable of holding over a million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims.<sup>25</sup> Prisoners in these camps are detained not because of any crime, but rather because of their ethnicity, their religion, or simply their seemingly irreconcilable difference from China’s Han majority: this is racial profiling on a mass scale, supported by an extensive system of concentration camps. Grounds for detention in the camps include such acts as prayer, fasting, growing a beard, wearing a hijab, attending mosque, and abstaining from alcohol or tobacco: everyday cultural customs all reframed here as manifestations of “extremism” when practiced by Uyghurs.<sup>26</sup> There is no formal detention process, nor trials: targets are presumed guilty, and imprisoned indefinitely.<sup>27</sup>

The Olympic Charter clearly states that:

The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.<sup>28</sup>

The charter continues to state that these rights are to be enjoyed “without discrimination of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, sexual orientation, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”<sup>29</sup> Yet even practicing sports can result in imprisonment for Uyghurs.

Efran Hezim, a professional Uyghur soccer player, was held in a concentration camp for eleven months in 2018 and 2019. His crime was “travelling overseas,” specifically to soccer



training camps and matches in Dubai and Spain.<sup>30</sup> Other non-Uyghur participants in these training exercises from China were not punished. However, “interest in travel abroad” is one of the many fundamentally non-criminal acts that can lead to detention in Xinjiang’s camp system for a Uyghur.

An aspiring professional soccer player, Erpat Ablekrem was also detained by the Xinjiang authorities in March of 2018. His only crime was maintaining contact with family members who had moved abroad, a fact of life for families in today’s globalized world, and an act for which no Han Chinese citizen would be imprisoned.<sup>31</sup> These two athletes’ sole offense, at the end of the day, was simply being Uyghur, an ethnic group to whom even the most basic of rights are currently being denied by the party-state hosting the 2022 Olympic Games.

The Olympic Charter also lists as one of the movement’s goals “the preservation of human dignity.” This is not only a laudable goal, but also a very practical goal for the Olympic Games: hosting athletes from around the world to compete in an environment of friendship and respect should foster mutual understanding, respect, and the promotion of human dignity.

In the current environment in Xinjiang, however, human dignity is being openly trampled upon. The latest research indicates that at least 1 out of every ten Uyghurs is being held in concentration camps.<sup>32</sup> This is racial profiling and arbitrary detention on a mass scale. Former detainees have described the conditions in camps as squalid and overcrowded. Inmates are pressured, under the constant monitoring of guards, to abandon their religious beliefs and cultural practices. They are indoctrinated with Party-state propaganda and forced to sing songs of praise for the Chinese Communist Party and its current Chairman, Xi Jinping. There are allegations of food deprivation, sleep deprivation, torture, sexual abuse, and forced medication inside the camps.<sup>33</sup> In such an environment, there is no human dignity to speak of. The camp system in Xinjiang today is thus not only an undeniable affront to human rights and dignity, but also fundamentally incompatible with the Olympic Charter and the ideals of the Olympic Movement.

Is the International Olympic Committee comfortable holding the Games in a country enacting such policies in open violation of the Olympic Charter? Will the global sporting community and the general public willingly follow China down this dark path? The 1936 Summer Olympics in Nazi Germany remain to this day a troubling and inerasable historical stain on the reputation of the Games.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, the exclusion of apartheid-era South Africa from participation in the Olympic Games from 1964 to 1988 sets a positive precedent for dealing with this type of racial oppression.

It is far past time for responsible stakeholders in the International Olympic Committee and the global community to learn from these historical lessons, leveraging the value that the Chinese Communist Party places on the Olympics to apply pressure to end these dehumanizing policies in Xinjiang.

If we are truly committed to avoiding a repeat of the mistakes of the 1930s, and if we truly believe in the values articulated in the Olympic Charter, we need to communicate to Beijing by any and all channels possible that the 2022 Beijing-Zhangjiakou Winter Olympics cannot proceed while millions remain held in concentration camps in Xinjiang.

#### **IV. Policy Recommendations**

The Chinese Communist Party is dedicated to hosting the Olympic Games, a cornerstone of its domestic legitimization and international soft power projects. However, the Chinese Communist Party's current policies in Xinjiang violate the fundamental ideals of the Olympic Charter, particularly with regards to opposing discrimination and preserving human dignity. For this reason, holding the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing is incompatible with the Olympic Charter, and allowing the Chinese Communist Party to earn political capital from this event would greatly damage the Games' reputation.

We propose the following measures for the International Olympic Committee, national Olympic committees and governments, and the general public to clearly say "no" to the 2022 Beijing-Zhangjiakou Games unless Beijing makes significant, verifiable, and lasting policy changes.

The International Olympic Committee as one of the sole international institutions with potential influence over the CCP and its policies must:

1. Work through the newly formed IOC Advisory Committee on Human Rights, currently only designated to begin operations for the 2024 Games, to communicate to Beijing the necessity of host cities abiding by the Olympic Charter.
2. Inform Beijing that its policy of holding millions indefinitely and arbitrarily in concentration camps, among other policies of widespread profiling and repression, is a violation of multiple clauses in the Olympic Charter, not least the stated goal of "the preservation of human dignity."
3. Inform China that if the camps are not closed by July 24, 2020, the opening date for the Tokyo Games, the IOC will no longer be able to cooperate with Beijing in planning for the 2022 Games and will seek an alternate location.
4. In this case, the IOC should seek an alternate location for the 2022 Games in a city that has previously hosted the Winter Olympic Games and would thereby require less intensive preparation. The work required, however, would be worthwhile to avoid tarnishing the Games' reputation as endorsing a racial concentration camp system.

The Olympic Games are a gathering of athletes from around the world, competing in a spirit of fairness, equality, and mutual respect. Such ideals, however, are sadly not accessible for Uyghurs and other ethnicities facing persecution in China today.

For these reasons, national Olympic committees and political leaders from around the world must:

1. Communicate to the IOC that current policies in Xinjiang are fundamentally incompatible with the Olympic Charter and apply pressure on the IOC to use its Advisory Committee on Human Rights to honestly assess the crisis in Xinjiang today.
2. Make clear to the Chinese leadership through diplomatic channels that current policies in Xinjiang make participation in the 2022 Games impossible.

3. Push for the International Olympic Committee to seek an alternate location for the Winter Games if the camps are not closed by July 24, 2020, and actively work with the newly designated host city to ensure success.
4. Refuse to participate in the Games if current policies remain unchanged and the IOC does not take action: in such a context, participation would be an endorsement of racial profiling and the Xinjiang concentration camp system.

The Olympic Games are intended to be a gathering of nations in sport viewed and enjoyed by audiences around the globe. These audiences, however, do not want to be unwitting accomplices to the mass persecution ongoing in Xinjiang today.

The general public should:

1. Sign the “No Rights, No Games 2022” petition<sup>35</sup> urging the International Olympic Committee to take action to ensure that the Games are not held in a country holding millions in concentration camps.
2. Communicate their opposition to current Chinese government policies in Xinjiang to the International Olympic Committee, their own national Olympic committees, and their governments, demanding that these bodies apply pressure on China to close its camps and end all other policies of profiling and repression. In gathering support for such moves, activists should remain cognizant of the fact that there are precedents for such pressures, such as the exclusion of apartheid-era South Africa from the Olympic Games.
3. Communicate their opposition to current Chinese government policies in Xinjiang to the sponsors of the 2022 Winter Games, calling on these sponsors, who will pay hundreds of millions of dollars to the IOC through their partnership, to take a clear stand against discrimination and racial oppression, and to apply their leverage as Olympic sponsor.

These sponsors are:

- Allianz (insurance partner)
- Alibaba
- Atos
- Bridgestone
- Coca-Cola
- Dow
- General Electric
- Intel
- Omega
- Panasonic
- Procter & Gamble
- Samsung
- Toyota
- Visa

4. Ensure that China's Uyghur policy and the concentration camp system are central topics of discussion and reporting at any Olympics-related event in the coming years, including the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.
5. Refuse to attend or view the Games if current policies remain unchanged and the IOC does not take action: joining in the Games would constitute open endorsement of China's policies.
6. Boycott the Games' corporate sponsors if they continue to support the Games in China while the camps remain open.

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- <sup>35</sup> “Petition to the International Olympic Committee: China: Respect Uyghur Rights Before Hosting 2022 Olympics (Uyghurche/ 中文 / 日本語 /Türkçe/عربي)” on Change.org. <https://www.change.org/p/international-olympic-committee-china-close-internment-camps-before-hosting-2022-olympics-uyghurche-%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%87-%E6%97%A5%E6%9C%AC%E8%AA%9E-%C3%BCrk%C3%A7e-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%89-00c0e1f3-3ba3-4752-820e-bac10f922330>  
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**UHRP**

**UYGHUR HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT**

The Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) was founded by the Uyghur American Association (UAA) in 2004 with a supporting grant from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). UHRP's mission is to promote human rights and democracy for the Uyghur people. In 2016, UHRP became an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, tax-exempt organization.

UHRP works to raise the profile of the Uyghur people by:

Researching, writing and publishing commentary and reports in English and Chinese covering a broad range human rights issues involving civil and political rights, through to social cultural and economic rights; preparing briefings – either written or in person – for journalists, academics, diplomats and legislators on the human rights situation faced by the Uyghur people.

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