

URGENT ACTION

UYGHUR MODEL HELD INCOMMUNICADO FOR MONTHS

Merdan Ghappar has not been seen or heard from since March 2020, after his messages and photos describing his poor detention conditions were shared on social media. Detained since January 2020, the authorities only recently disclosed that Merdan Ghappar is under “compulsory measures” on suspicion of assaulting health care workers. There are serious concerns for Merdan Ghappar’s wellbeing, as it is feared he is at risk of torture or other ill-treatment.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Director Wang Xiaoming
Kuqa County Public Security Bureau
Jiefang Lu, Kuqa Shi
842000 Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region
People’s Republic of China

Dear Director Wang:

*I am writing to express my concern about **Merdan Ghappar (麦尔丹·阿巴)**, a Uyghur model who has currently been placed under “compulsory measures” (强制措施). He was taken away in January 2020 in Foshan, Guangdong Province, and has not been seen or heard from since March 2020.*

Messages from Merdan Ghappar that have circulated publicly on social media include distressing details and photos describing his poor detention conditions. He described overcrowding, poor hygiene, insufficient COVID-19 protection measures and screaming from a presumed interrogation room. A self-taken video from March 2020 showed him shackled to a bed in a room. No one has seen or heard from him since then.

I do not find it reassuring that Xinjiang authorities disclosed limited details about Merdan Ghappar’s situation only after his case was raised by the international media. According to their written statement, Merdan Ghappar was transferred to his hometown Kuqa by the authorities. He is apparently being held under “compulsory measures” for assaulting health care workers and was handcuffed to his bed to stop him from self-harm and over-reaction against police.

I am concerned that Merdan Ghappar remains in detention solely because of the videos and messages he sent. With no access to his family, or a lawyer of his choice, I am also gravely concerned about his condition and wellbeing, as I fear he is at risk of torture or other ill-treatment in violation of international law.

I therefore call on you to:

- ***Release Merdan Ghappar or charge him promptly with an internationally recognized criminal offence and not for the peaceful exercise of his human rights and try him in line with international fair trial standards;***
- ***Pending his release, disclose Merdan Ghappar’s whereabouts, allow him access to his family and a lawyer of his choice, and ensure he is not subjected to torture and other ill-treatment.***

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Merdan Ghappar, 31, is a Uyghur fashion model for Taobao, one of the largest Chinese online retailers. He left Xinjiang in 2009 for better prospects in the eastern part of China. He was working in Foshan, Guangdong Province, when he was sentenced to 16 months' imprisonment for selling cannabis. He resumed his model work after being released in late November 2019.

His videos and social media messages describing his detention conditions were reported by [BBC](#) on 4 August. The report went viral and attracted a lot of attention to the mass detentions and other human rights violations in Xinjiang. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs initially refuted the BBC report and described it as "typical fake news". Afterwards, the BBC received a written statement by the Xinjiang government press office disclosing [more details](#).

According to China's Criminal Procedure Law, "compulsory measures" comprise a range of measures with varying degrees of restriction or deprivation of personal liberty that may be taken by law enforcement or judicial authorities against a criminal suspect or defendant. These range from the more restrictive criminal detention or arrest, in which an individual is held in custody at a formal detention centre, to the less restrictive residential surveillance or release on bail pending further investigation. It also includes "residential surveillance in a designated location. In March 2020, the United Nations human rights expert bodies expressed their alarm at the ongoing use of residential surveillance at a designated location (RSDL) in China, a detention system that enables the authorities to hold criminal suspects for periods of up to six months outside the formal detention system in what can amount to a form of secret incommunicado detention. This form of detention has been used to curb the activities of human rights defenders, including lawyers, activists and religious practitioners.

Xinjiang is one of the most ethnically diverse regions in China. More than half of the region's population of 22 million people belong to mostly Turkic and predominantly Muslim ethnic groups, including Uyghurs (around 11.3 million), Kazakhs (around 1.6 million) and other populations whose languages, cultures and ways of life vary distinctly from those of the Han who are the majority in "interior" China.

In March 2017, the Xinjiang government enacted the "De-extremification Regulation" that identifies and prohibits a wide range of behaviours labelled "extremist", such as "spreading extremist thought", denigrating or refusing to watch public radio and TV programmes, wearing burkas, having an "abnormal" beard, resisting national policies, and publishing, downloading, storing, or reading articles, publications, or audio-visual materials containing "extremist content". The regulation also set up a "responsibility system" for government cadres for "anti-extremism" work and established annual reviews of their performance.

It is estimated that up to a million Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other predominantly Muslim people have been held in the "transformation-through-education" centres. The Chinese authorities had denied the existence of such facilities until October 2018, when they began describing them as voluntary, free "vocational training" centres. They claim that the objective of this vocational training is to provide people with technical and vocational education to enable them to find jobs and become "useful" citizens. China's explanation, however, contradicts reports of beatings, food deprivation and solitary confinement that have been collected from former detainees.

China has rejected calls from the international community, including Amnesty International, to allow independent experts unrestricted access to Xinjiang. Instead, China has made efforts to silence criticism by inviting delegations from different countries to visit Xinjiang for carefully orchestrated and closely monitored tours.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Chinese, English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 9 October 2020

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Merdan Ghappar (he/ him)