



AN INTERNATIONAL PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL

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| Witness Name: Nathan Ruser  |   |  |
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| Date of testimony: 12 September 2021  |   |  |
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\*Please note that all recordings of the Uyghur Tribunal hearings can be found on You Tube: [Uyghur Tribunal - YouTube](#)



1 **12<sup>th</sup> September 2021 (2:41:45 – 3:23:01)**

2 **Nathan Ruser**

3  
4 *COUNSEL – Your research I mentioned earlier relates to looking at the physical*  
5 *environment in Xinjiang in the province, increased securitisation, physical changes in*  
6 *urban and rural landscape, widespread demolition of Islamic spaces of worship.*  
7 *Chinese government sources repeatedly said developments in Xinjiang have been*  
8 *made for the people there, from your understanding of and analysis of the imagery*  
9 *you have processed – is this the case, and is it for all the people there?*

10 NATHAN RUSER – China cites the 2008 earthquake to pursue development and  
11 demolition policy. We see a deliberate attempt to severely demolish Uyghur public  
12 space, housing and public sacred sites. Under the guise of urban renewal, there is no  
13 consent from people who lived in these houses and no recourse to say they chose  
14 their houses. Traditional Uyghur houses, low density, but 1-2 storeys tall, suitable, in  
15 landscape for 100-1000s of years, have been demolished you don't see in the rest of  
16 China. One issue that might be illustrative is the demolition of mosques. 900 sacred  
17 sites, 600 mosques, a third are being demolished since 2017. Although this has been  
18 in purview of urban development, as stated in media sources, we found a high  
19 proportion of mosques demolished are bland – empty lots, sometimes parking,  
20 sometimes parks, but not anything to back up urban renewal or development. With  
21 Uyghur housing you are seeing when you go through Hotan, Kashgar, you see signs  
22 of what buildings used to look like and how we have revitalised that. We can see this  
23 stripping away the genuine aspect of culture and making it a cultural Disney land – just

24 blanket demolition exists outside of indigenous housing in Xinjiang. It gives way to  
25 generally high-rise building, more easily securitised in a grid fashion.

26 *COUNSEL – Would it be correct to say that while these developments could develop*  
27 *some proportion of society, they seem to be at the detriment of Uyghur people and*  
28 *culture?*

29 NR – Yes, they target specific areas of Uyghur housing not more generally, also scale  
30 seems greater than urban demolition in rest of China. In last week or two policies put  
31 in place which stems urban demolition without consulting with people who live there.  
32 Hopefully that applies to Xinjiang there. When we look at policies there is disparity  
33 between how applicable in Xinjiang and in rest of China.

34 *COUNSEL – You base your opinion on satellite imagery, give a view on increased*  
35 *securitisation, indigenous housing, tall buildings; can you provide an analysis of what*  
36 *the quality of life or conditions of living in Xinjiang looks like today?*

37 NR – It is hard to make that judgement from a satellite perspective, especially during  
38 2017-2020 the level of securitisation of Uyghurs not detained was quite invasive and  
39 annoying to say the least. Demolition in neighbourhoods, grid roads, separate cities  
40 into easily policed lots. Convenience police stations appeared on most corners in  
41 those blocks. Checks on each street every 100m for Uyghurs to get their biometrics  
42 checked. It indicates more the level of displacement, not so much to indicate the quality  
43 of life is necessarily lower – not living without toilets but it is severing of the cultural  
44 connection to the land in many neighbourhoods has been there for 100s of years.  
45 Connection to land and town has been severed and placed in high rise buildings.

46 *COUNSEL – In your view are these significant changes appear temporary or intended*  
47 *to be permanent?*

48 NR – Blanket securitisation has been limited since 2020, end of 2019 – qualifying  
49 language as convenience police stations scale back, some less securitised. A period  
50 of intense criminalisation of Uyghur culture, to some extent that may be lifting. These  
51 changes in general seem permanent to the urban fabric and not something that can  
52 be wound back. For example, in Urumqi and Kashgar, limited demolition before 2010,  
53 there is not reversing of these demolitions, not building new Uyghur neighbourhoods  
54 in Uyghur style – become unified housing towers. Beyond urban fabric there is the  
55 permanent of relocation of people for labour programs and for farms. These are hard  
56 to turn back. In many cases in the bureaucratic mess in Xinjiang even if there was a  
57 will to reverse – who owns what has been lost. I have heard reports, cannot vouch as  
58 on a satellite is difficult, children are sent to state run schools and boarding schools, a  
59 lineage is being lost. Changes are not so much they don't seem to be loosening of the  
60 firmness. I have confidence harsh measures have affected security there –  
61 government officials have not become softer or more humane, its more what was  
62 being presented as urgent threat to Uyghur culture and ordinary acts of culture were  
63 as in 2017, that has been addressed in many policy makers now which is why we are  
64 seeing policies loosen.

65 *PANEL – Which government authorities might have overseen the commission of the*  
66 *sorts of activities we have discussed such as the demolition of mosques or the*  
67 *construction of detention facilities?*

68 NR – I mentioned a forthcoming report before from my colleagues – this is still  
69 forthcoming. I have not worked on it myself. It's a party drive approach – they have  
70 more control than government. Specific policies in an area, it is quite locally run at a  
71 country level, or county working group that is being given power to implement region  
72 wide directives. Headed by party secretary of the region or township and incorporated

73 low level civil servants or judiciary or education board of the county and that is how  
74 the region wide directives trickle down.

75 *PANEL – Asked details of citation in institute reports in Australian... [Australian*  
76 *Strategic Policy Institute?]*

77 NR – That has been most cited on issue of forced labour than detention centre.  
78 Research is held in high regard in Australian government circles, it is independent and  
79 non-partisan. We see statistics and citing reports back. Being substantive basis of  
80 policy that is largely being forced labour issue as Australian government has taken  
81 less action on camps, but more instrumental on forced labour. The rest of our research  
82 statistics findings are referenced in the preamble of discussions.

83 *PANEL – On question of independence, I believe the Xinjiang Data Project is*  
84 *predominantly funded by the UK foreign office. Could you tell us how they manage*  
85 *independence around those kinds of grants?*

86 NR – We run on specific projects grants and largely funded by the US state  
87 department. We have proposed the research we want to do and we got funding and  
88 grants for those specific proposals, we are quite confident to maintain independence  
89 and we go to them with their findings, and tell them without them being involved in  
90 editorial processes.

91 *PANEL – To go back to what you were saying around the destruction of culture, we*  
92 *heard a witness yesterday who estimated about 24,000 mosques and 10-15,000 have*  
93 *been demolished or altered. That is in keeping with your view?*

94 NR – That fact might come from our findings. It comes from the 2004-2005 census –  
95 which listed all the religious sites, there are about 24,500 mosques – used by  
96 government sources to say there is no persecution. We did extensive research on

97 mosques. What we did was collected point of interest databases from Chinese  
98 commercial sources, google maps for China and we researched mosques and found  
99 16 million points. We culled that to mosques in Xinjiang and found a few hundred.  
100 Then looked outside of this, in each country, picked random townships and visually  
101 searched. We found 600-700 across Xinjiang different prefectures – then returned to  
102 pre 2017 and extracted that using 2005 [*economic centre?*]... One third had been  
103 demolished – about 8000 mosques entirely, 7500 mosques damaged and de-  
104 islamified such as the removal of domes, Islamic architecture, removal of Islamic  
105 architecture. For example, a Heritage mosque in southern Xinjiang: the main  
106 gatehouse and prayer hall were demolished but some still standing. The upshot was  
107 we found 1/3 demolished, 1/3 damaged or rectified they use. Also coupled that with,  
108 this wasn't part of estimation, about 75% of mosques remain standing physically. We  
109 cannot assess this from space, but a lot of more recent visitors report that three  
110 quarters of mosques that remain 1/3 are locked, shut, unopen in some way which is a  
111 huge number. We have found similar percentages of public sacred sites such as  
112 shrines but also cemeteries in some regions.

113 *PANEL – With a third of mosques not demolished, what can you tell us about where*  
114 *they tend to be located?*

115 NR – We found on research was in a state-run journal by party school lecturer which  
116 recommended a unit should have one mosque and should stand by rectification  
117 standards, only opened one day of week and on holidays. I can check the reference.  
118 Remained were low key mosques to start with without Islamic architecture, majority of  
119 mosques had minarets and domes removed and one third undamaged were one's  
120 square buildings before fit with rectification standards. Geographically we see a very  
121 uniform policy where consistent throughout Xinjiang, whether prefecture, rural, urban,

122 still rate one third demolished, the rest have been rectified and de-islamified. Few  
123 exceptions in Urumqi – much higher repropotion of mosques are standing, some  
124 reports say some still open. I am not saying some mosques not demolished in Urumqi  
125 as there has been, but some are still standing. Perhaps as the city is maybe more  
126 cosmopolitan and more in rest of world eyes. Some extent the same in Kashgar,  
127 largescale Islamic sites, shrines and mosques in Kashgar city have not been  
128 demolished – some theme-parkified. Otherwise, we see a blanket rate of demolition.  
129 With the exception of the demolition of cemeteries which seems to be done at local  
130 level. Such as [Arku?] all traditional cemeteries demolished – ecologically sustainable  
131 cemetery project – and individual counties at different rates. Disparity between  
132 cemetery and mosque demolition.

133 *PANEL – Turning to another of your areas, detention centres. We know from your*  
134 *report in June, we identified 380 new and expanded since 2017, also listening to*  
135 *evidence about that this morning. Do you have a sense of how many of the 280 are*  
136 *re-education as opposed to prisons or other kind of a facility?*

137 NR – I can check. But while doing that the differentiation is made on physical  
138 architecture and securitisation, highly secured prisons, or tier 3 camps are pretrial  
139 detention centres. Of tiers we considered re-education camps were tiers 1-2 there  
140 were 111 and 96 facilities, tier 3 (mostly be pretrial and detention centres) 70 of those,  
141 tier 4 (traditional prisons) 110 of those. There are different ways to break it up. For  
142 example, in their investigation BuzzFeed looked at the same data. In ours 111 plus 96  
143 are re-education, 180 are pre-trial detention or prisons.

144 *PANEL – We have also heard estimates about capacity, have you attempted to*  
145 *estimate?*



146 NR - We have been careful. There are too many unknowns to estimate a number. We  
147 don't know how many detainees are in a cell – it varies in the same centre with different  
148 levels of security. BuzzFeed has the most reliable figures on total capacity. We  
149 generally say when we look at the data that the figure of 1 million does not seem  
150 absurd based on size and scale of facilities. We like to look at it not at the total number  
151 of detainees, which is complicated to estimate. We look at how many people in  
152 Xinjiang per detention site. There are 14-15 million Uyghurs and other Turkic minorities  
153 in Xinjiang so about 1 facility for 35,000 indigenous residents of Xinjiang. This is an  
154 astounding figure – it is comparable to Turkey constructing 435 for the Kurdic  
155 population in last 3-4 years, or New York building 55 detention centres for black  
156 Americans just in New York city since 2017.

157 *PANEL - Does that include children?*

158 NR – Yes, the rate potentially higher. There is no scientific index, just a comparative  
159 tool. Detainee estimate cannot be put down.

160 *PANEL – If you say 1 million is not unreasonable, can you suggest what range we*  
161 *would see, between minimum and maximum?*

162 NR – This is complicated as this is capacity, rather than people detained at one point  
163 – guess currently not at full capacity as number of sites security have closed –  
164 600,000-1,500,000 is a figure maybe not far from that but hard firm estimate.

165 *PANEL – In a city like Shanghai appears to be massive clearance of low-level housing,*  
166 *displacement of people and creation of high-level buildings. You have told us the scale*  
167 *is greater in Xinjiang, do you have any numerical data to substantiate that statement?*

168 NR – Not currently, we have a few examples illustrative to look at including a base line  
169 over other cities. I can point to Manas county, an example which very clearly shows

170 an abnormal rate of demolition and Qaraqash county – I can share my screen? In most  
171 cities it is over a quarter, and over a half has been demolished which is different ...  
172 best way to compare in rest of China when neighbourhoods get demolished it's  
173 because of project such as road being built, a need for something to occupy this space.  
174 Not the case in Xinjiang – they stay razed and barren.

175 *PANEL – In the calculation of the range of institutions, clearly two estimates is capacity*  
176 *and the occupants. Is it reasonable to assume that the occupancy is pretty close to*  
177 *the capacity given that the ongoing construction of the new facilities in your view?*

178 NR - I would say that is it safe to say the peak occupancy was close to the capacity  
179 as most sites was built in response to the policy. They were not already there (the  
180 buildings) at peak of project occupancy was close. It is trickier now as construction  
181 seen now is higher security areas, but securitisation appears to be in the lower security  
182 camps. This fits in from what hear from survivors and seen from figures that increasing  
183 numbers of people detained are sentenced to formal prisons and that explains the  
184 growth – can't draw because construction is ongoing capacity is increasing. I believe  
185 a fair number detained are now released into residential neighbourhood super  
186 surveillance or programs but out of the detention system and ones that did not show  
187 satisfactory progress are sentenced to formal prison.

188 *PANEL – Can I ask you to speculate, in your experience or opinion, release from*  
189 *detention centre into the community, the gradient into the community is, motive not*  
190 *much different to being in a centre or in wider community given the security?*

191 NR – There is a different strain on local police officers – in leaked police reports, police  
192 are required to visit formal detainees. We call them three classes – former detainees,  
193 the others I can't remember off top of my head. Certainly, they get a higher level of

194 surveillance, not just physical but also people are regularly assessed on acquiescence  
195 to government policy.

196 *PANEL – Are you able to say on doors of high-rise new buildings are all subject to*  
197 *entry and exit cameras?*

198 NR – This is not something we can tell. We see high level of security there – people  
199 responsible dedicated security of those communities and those building of housing  
200 compounds but that appears to be quite across the board in Xinjiang. Han  
201 communities have level of neighbourhood watch. It is hard to ascertain how that  
202 differs.

203 *PANEL – If there were cameras at every door of high build, whether everyone in home*  
204 *or house, would be easy to check, is it possible to have cameras there/?*

205 NR – I would be shocked if not. It is unclear if they do exist whether they feed into  
206 public security database to say this Chinese ID number is at home right now. I can  
207 suspect they can but I am not the best person to speak on that.