

## **China's Uighurs and the Beijing Olympics: When Confronting Genocide is Inconvenient**

*An opinion piece, submitted by a deVeber Institute research intern*

I boycotted the Beijing Olympics.

I boycotted by refusing to watch the live coverage and the playbacks on websites such as YouTube.

To some, this may seem extreme. I have heard all of the arguments:

*“One person boycotting the Olympics won’t do much.”*

*“The athletes have worked so hard to get there - don’t you want to support them?”*

*“The athletes didn’t do anything. Why should they be punished?”*

*“For some of the athletes this is their last chance to play at the Olympics. Why should they be deprived of something they’ve spent their whole lives training for?”*

None of these arguments have swayed me. In this article, I will explain why. In order to formulate an answer to these arguments, it is necessary to answer a few questions first:

*Who are the Uighurs?*

*Why have several countries accused China of genocide against them?*

*Why is China hosting the Olympics such a big deal?*

### **Who are the Uighurs?**

The Uighurs (also spelled “Uyghurs”) are a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority of Turkish descent who live in the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

## **Why has China been accused of genocide against the Uighurs?**

The Chinese government has a very long history of oppressing Uighurs. However, since at least 2017, the Chinese government has been locking up Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities in “re-education camps.” In 2020, there were 380 known camps. While the Chinese government claims that these camps are “counter-extremism” centres where the radicalized are offered vocational job training and education, in reality the evidence reveals that these centres are instead maximum-security concentration camps.<sup>1</sup>

Initially, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) denied the existence of the camps. In the face of overwhelming evidence including satellite images of the camps, however, the CPP changed its story. Yes, the camps exist, they now admitted — but they were simply “vocational training” centres designed to counter religious extremism and terrorism through education.<sup>2</sup>

According to a government ex-cadre, Chinese officials have burned all documents that had to do with these camps, including meeting notes. Ex-cadres, former workers in the camps, and camp survivor testimonies have all painted a disturbing picture: torture, mass death, forced sterilizations and womb removals, many forms of sexual abuse, forced abortions, and forced labour. Uighurs are also coached on what to say and how to act when journalists enter the camps: they are to smile and speak positively about the camps or face torture.<sup>3</sup>

Even outside of the camps, the Uighurs live in constant fear of being arbitrarily arrested and taken to the camps. Many Uighur activists who have escaped China have had their family members

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<sup>1</sup> Who Are the Uighurs and Why Is the US Accusing China of Genocide? BBC News; British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] 2021 February 9. [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037). Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Graham-Harrison E. China Has Built 380 Internment Camps in Xinjiang, Study Finds. The Guardian; Guardian News and Media 24 Sept. 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/24/china-has-built-380-internment-camps-in-xinjiang-study-finds>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Schechter A. New Details of Torture, Cover-Ups in China's Internment Camps Revealed in Amnesty International Report. NBCNews.com; NBCUniversal News Group 10 June 2021. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/new-details-torture-cover-ups-china-s-internment-camps-revealed-n1270014>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

taken to the camps as punishment for them speaking out. Han Chinese people have been moved into Uighur homes to act as spies and report any infractions to the authorities. A Uighur may be arrested and sent to the camps for “offenses” including wearing a hijab under forty-five years of age, publicly mourning the loss of a loved one, eating breakfast before sunrise, petitioning against local officials, deciding to not drink alcohol, having more than five people over to your house without reporting it to the police first, owning camping equipment, and knowing someone who has gone abroad even if only for a short vacation. This list is not exhaustive. All cars owned by Uighurs must be fitted with tracking devices. All Uighur-owned cellphones must have apps that monitor their activity.<sup>4</sup>

### **What is the significance of the Beijing Olympics for China?**

The Olympic Truce is a 3,000 year old tradition that states that participating countries will consent to “a halt to conflicts during one of the world’s premiere sporting events” in order “to spread the message of peace, dialogue and reconciliation.”<sup>5</sup> This long-standing truce and political neutrality are fundamental principles of the Olympics. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) voted to invoke the Olympic Truce and allow China to host the Olympic Games. The United Nations (UN) ratified the

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<sup>4</sup> About Uighurs. Save Uighur; Justice for All 2020. <https://www.saveuighur.org/>. Accessed 1 March 2022.; Muslims Detained in Chinese Concentration Camps. Save Uighur; Justice for All 2020. [www.saveuighur.org/camps/](http://www.saveuighur.org/camps/). Accessed 1 March 2022.; Schmitz R. A Woman Tells Her Story Of Forced Abortion And Escape From China's Repression. NPR; National Public Radio 2018 November 14. [www.npr.org/2018/11/14/667699261/one-kazakhs-woman-journey-toward-escaping-china-to-kazakhstan](http://www.npr.org/2018/11/14/667699261/one-kazakhs-woman-journey-toward-escaping-china-to-kazakhstan). Accessed 1 March 2022.; Halliday E. Forced Abortion and Secret Sterilisation: How China Has Abused Uighur Women for Decades. New Statesman; New Statesman Media Group 2020 October 1. [www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2020/10/forced-abortion-and-secret-sterilisation-how-china-has-abused-uighur-women](http://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2020/10/forced-abortion-and-secret-sterilisation-how-china-has-abused-uighur-women). Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>5</sup> UN General Assembly Adopts Olympic Truce for Beijing 2022, Highlighting the Contribution of Sport to the Promotion of Peace and Solidarity - Olympic News. Olympics.com; International Olympic Committee 2 Dec. 2021. <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/un-general-assembly-adopts-olympic-truce-for-beijing-2022>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

agreement.<sup>6</sup> I believe this to be a poor excuse for allowing the Olympic Games to take place in Beijing.

China hosting the Olympics brought more than just the international prestige associated with hosting such a large event — it advanced China's attempts to rise to global notoriety as a hub for winter sports. It also gave China the opportunity to continue their propaganda campaign in front of the world by parading a Uighur athlete around — an obvious attempt to reinforce their narrative that every Uighur and ex-cadre who speaks out against the abuses is a liar.<sup>7</sup> This all in the presence of overwhelming evidence that has been corroborated by victims, ex-healthcare workers, ex-camp security workers, and ex-cadres alike. People, I may add, who do not know each other and yet have come out with the same story.

### **Argument 1: Your boycott does nothing.**

I have heard this argument more than once. It contends that my boycott was an effort in futility. When combined with the other three arguments, it says my position is both useless in helping the Uighur people and unduly punishing the athletes for something that they did not do.

I concede that one person boycotting the Olympics would not have done much. However, if many people decide to protest in this manner, then it will — and, in fact, did — have a huge impact.

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<sup>6</sup> Maung D. UN Ratifies Olympic Truce as Several Nations Boycott Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. Vision Times; Vision Times 6 Dec. 2021. <https://www.visiontimes.com/2021/12/06/un-ratifies-olympic-truce.html#:~:text=On%20Dec.%202022%2C%20the%20United%20Nations%20%28UN%29%20ratified,Communist%20Party%20%E2%80%99s%20%28CCP%29%20record%20on%20human%20rights%20abuses>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Winter Olympics: China Stirs Controversy with Uighur Torchbearer. ALJAZEERA; Al Jazeera 5 Feb. 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/5/beijing-winter-olympics-china-uighur-torchbearer>. Accessed 1 March 2022.; Smith S, and Jett J. Uyghur Athlete Delivers Beijing Olympics Flame in Opening Ceremony after Global Criticism of China. NBCNews.com; NBCUniversal News Group 4 Feb. 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/winter-olympics-opening-ceremony-beijing-china-rcna14511>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

The Beijing Olympics primetime coverage viewership hit an all-time low, with less than half the viewership of the 2018 Olympics.<sup>8</sup>

For me, this was more than just an attempt to send a message— it was a matter of principle. I could not in good conscience watch the Beijing Olympics knowing that an estimated one to three million people are being held in concentration camps.<sup>9</sup> I could not enjoy the spectacle of an international sports extravaganza knowing that 130,000 Uighurs, excluding children, die every three months in Xinjiang.<sup>10</sup> As a religious person, I refuse to support the Olympics being held in a country that destroys Mosques and makes it illegal for women under the age of forty-five to wear hijabs in accordance with their sincerely held religious beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

#### **Arguments 2 - 4: What about the athletes?**

It is sad for the athletes, they do not deserve to have this opportunity taken from them. The IOC should have never allowed the Olympics to take place in Beijing given the Uighur genocide that is currently happening. Hiding behind the Olympic Truce was a cowardly way to avoid political upset, not a decision made in the interests of upholding the Olympic fundamental principles of peace and equality. Allowing China to host the Olympics flies in the face of everything that the Olympic Games is supposed to promote. These athletes have worked incredibly hard their entire lives - for many, the Olympics is the pinnacle of their career as a professional athlete. They should have never been put into this position.

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<sup>8</sup> Dunn A. 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics TV Ratings Nosedive to Record Low: See the Numbers. Outsider; Outsider 5 Feb. 2022. <https://outsider.com/news/entertainment/2022-beijing-winter-olympics-tv-ratings-nosedive-record-low-see-numbers/>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>9</sup> See: Muslims Detained in Chinese Concentration Camps. Save Uighur; Justice for All 2020. [www.saveuighur.org/camps/](http://www.saveuighur.org/camps/). Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See: About Uighurs. Save Uighur; Justice for All 2020. <https://www.saveuighur.org/>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

## Conclusion

One of the fundamental principles of the IOC states that,

“The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.”<sup>12</sup>

You cannot have it both ways. You cannot be committed to preserving human dignity, promoting peace, and ensuring basic human rights while at the same time hiding behind political neutrality in order to avoid making contentious statements. There is no neutrality when it comes to genocide. That, ultimately, is the reason why I, and many others, decided to boycott the Olympics.

The Olympics may be over, but the genocide against the Uighurs is not. Their suffering is ongoing. It will take much more than small protests like this to help the Uighurs. If you would like to get involved in a more significant way, there are charities you can donate to that aim to help Uighurs in need.

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<sup>12</sup> Olympic Charter. Olympics.com; International Olympic Committee 4 Jan. 2022. <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-charter>. Accessed 1 March 2022.

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