



HAS CHINA REALLY SHUT ITS CAMPS?

Despite the Chinese government's claims that it has released detainees from 'vocational training' sites, remote-sensing data reveals that a third of camps not only remain open but have extended their activities. By **Ben Heubl**

IN DECEMBER 2019, the Chinese government said it had released all prisoners from its 're-education' camps in the Xinjiang autonomous region. However, there was no evidence to support these claims. Now, state-of-the-art technology brings unique light to the story.

Remote-sensing analytics via nightlight luminosity is an emerging field of research that can be applied across a number of domains including deriving proxy measures of various official statistics, quantifying the light dimming caused by natural disasters, and exposing fake economic data, but its use for exposing false claims on activity in Xinjiang's re-education camps is unprecedented.

The data comes from the Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS), collected by the Nasa-NOAA Suomi NPP satellite, and is published by Nasa. VIIRS data registers

light intensity daily for each 742×742-metre pixel on the Earth's surface outside the Arctic Circle. To compare nightlight between different places and times, satellite images are pre-processed to eliminate noise such as cloud cover, snow or ephemeral lights before measurements are converted into average numeric values.

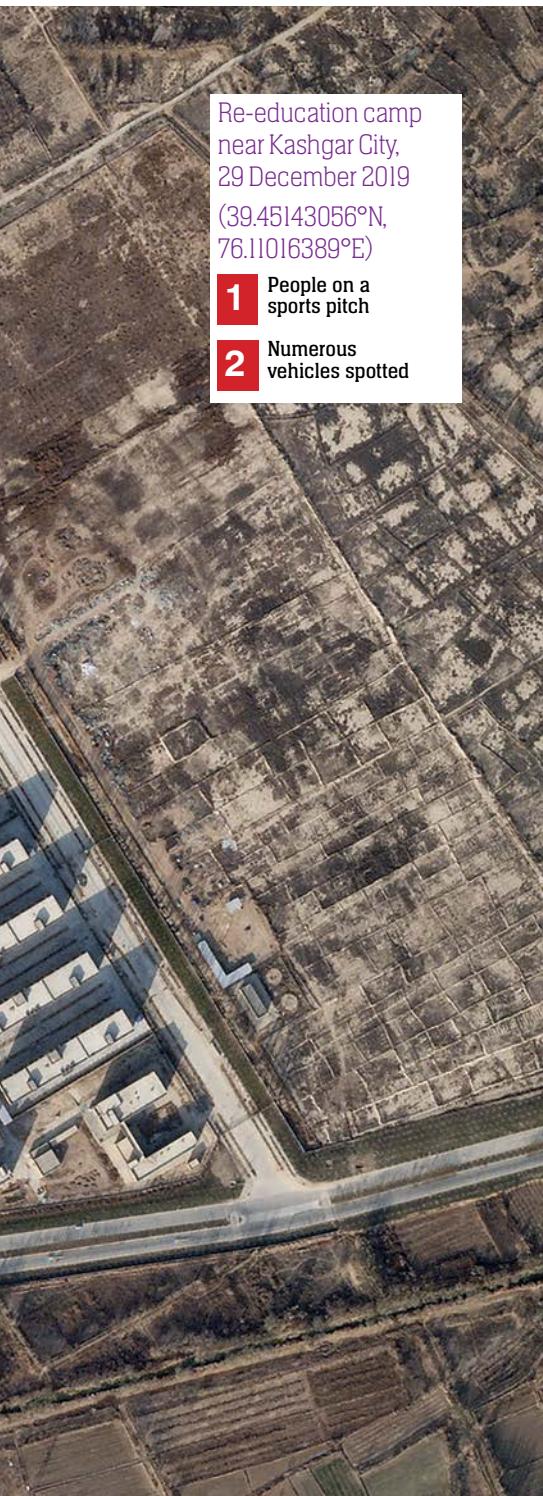
Did the government really release all prisoners, the majority of whom are from the Uighur ethnic group? *E&T* ran a large nightlight analysis on geo-locations of Xinjiang's re-education and vocational training camps. Our findings suggest that activity in the camps only slowed, or even – in about a third of cases – actually increased.

When China's claims on the release of detainees surfaced last year, the country's alleged detentions had already garnered harsh criticism from around the world. Some sources claimed that up to 1.5 million people

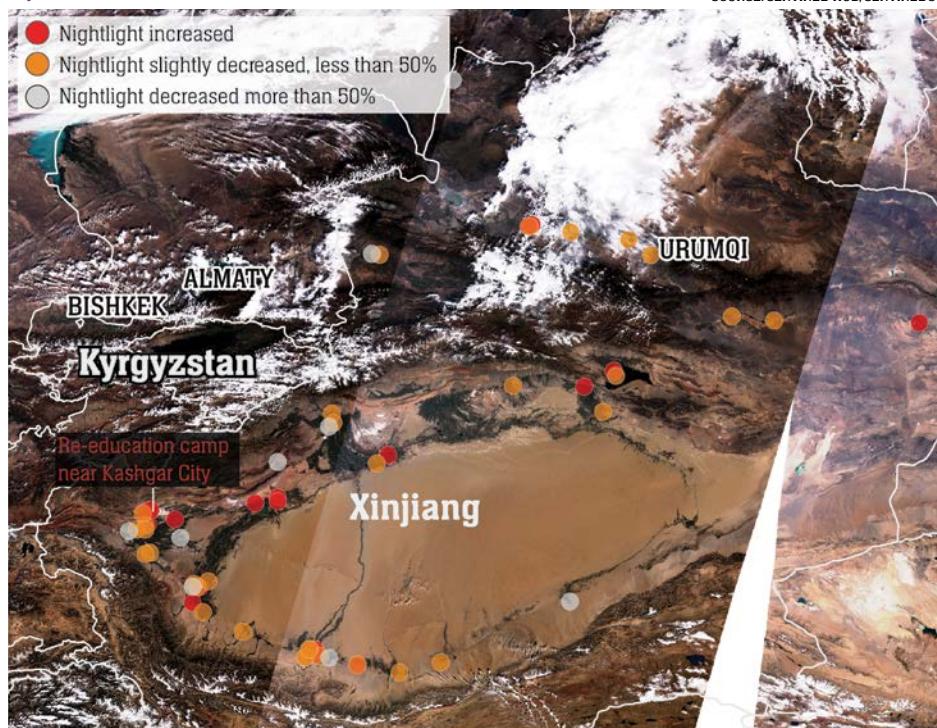
were detained. Last May, Randall Schriver from the US Defense Department said in a Pentagon briefing the number was "likely closer to three million".

In collaboration with a geospatial analyst at activist group ETNAM (the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement), a Washington DC-based non-profit group, *E&T* analysed a sample of 61 confirmed re-education camps across the Chinese province. Then, with the help of satellite analytics company SpaceKnow, we compared the camps' nightlight luminosity data for the second half of 2018 and the end of 2019. We applied algorithms to the luminosity data to judge whether activity increased, diminished or remained roughly the same.

For Xinjiang, *E&T* can confirm discrepancies in the statements made by Chinese officials. Out of the 61 re-education and vocational training camps, 52 were found

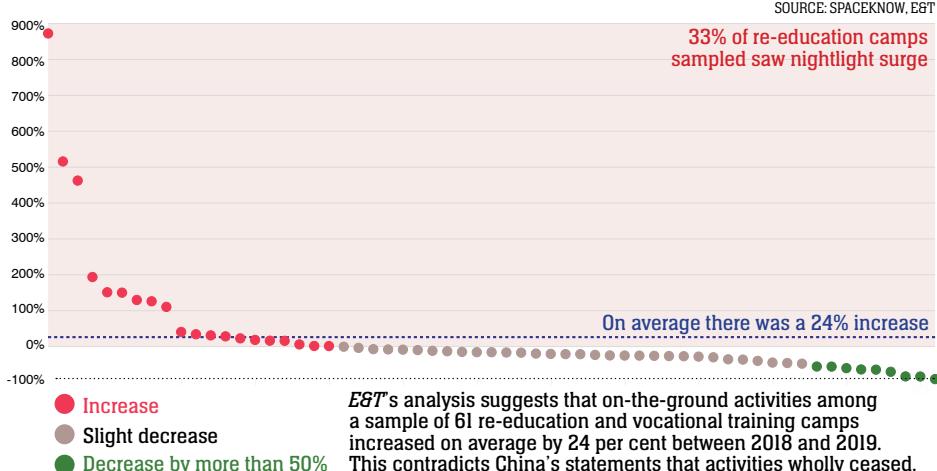


Nightlight changes at confirmed re-education camps By location (ETNAM)



Changes in nightlight by camp

Changes in nightlight luminosity between the second half of 2018 and August to October 2019 (%)



E&T's analysis suggests that on-the-ground activities among a sample of 61 re-education and vocational training camps increased on average by 24 per cent between 2018 and 2019. This contradicts China's statements that activities wholly ceased.

to have either increased activity or only decreased it by less than half – 32.8 per cent of camps were found to be brighter than before. On average, nighttime light increased by 24 per cent across the 61 camps.

The camps that revealed more nightlight provide quantitative evidence that China's government assertions on the release of detainees were incorrect, according to one expert. "Testimony says that camps always have the light on in the cells at night. So we can reasonably assume that if fewer cells are used, the unused ones will not be lit, and hence we can assume a broad correlation between the amount of light and the number of detainees," says Adrian Zenz, a senior fellow in China Studies at Victims of Communism, who focuses on researching China's policies in Xinjiang and Tibet. Zenz has investigated and written extensively about China's mass internment policy

against ethnic minorities in the north-western region of Xinjiang.

E&T followed Zenz's recommendation to compare the average for the second half of 2018 – not all of 2018 because some facilities were significantly expanded in that year, he says – with August to October of 2019. This produces a more accurate picture of the status within camps before and after China declared changes in prisoner-holding for the specific class of camps.

The fact that there is still a lot of light, and that in a third of cases the light has brightened, "would clearly contradict the government claim that 'all' have now been released", Zenz says.

Chinese policy documents "talk about the construction of factories either on the grounds of vocational training camps or nearby them".

But why would China commit itself to

claims it knew to be false? The statements are a propaganda device, Zenz thinks. "They had already said in the summer that most people had been released. The whole release narrative has to be seen in the context of the Beijing propaganda strategy," he says.

"From government policy, there is a general movement of shifting trainees into labour but there is not a clear policy that all or nearly all interned persons have in fact been released," he adds. "Also, those who are said to have 'graduated' may still live in the same buildings, but simply go to the factory rather than teaching buildings." For this Zenz says he has proof; he reviewed documents confirming that the government provides police escorts to bring these forced labourers from their internment facilities to the factories.

In a post for the Foreign Policy website, Zenz wrote in December that "for Beijing, >

◀ the real aim is not to improve Uighurs' lives... The first layer of the scheme is the most blatantly coercive. Under the label 'vocational education and training plus', the region is wooing mainland enterprises to train and employ internment camp detainees. Participating companies receive 1,800 RMB per camp detainee they train, and a further 5,000 RMB for each detainee they employ."

For *E&T* and experts to make accurate judgments on the nightlight data it was important to make careful distinctions between various camp types. The analysis initially considered 179 concentration camps, of which a total of 60 camps revealed increased nightlight activity. But the results were at risk of being challenged because the sample may have included camps that are not actually re-educational or vocational training camps but prisons, detention centres or sites of forced labour.

Images confirm data

Nightlight was not the only factor *E&T* relied on in this investigation. The latest high-resolution satellite images for late December and early January also confirm continued activities in camps. *E&T* checked satellite images provided by Planet Labs, a private Earth-imaging company based in San Francisco, for three of the largest re-education camps.

Salih S Hudayar, the founder and president of ETNAM, checked the high-resolution satellite images and says they confirm the findings from the nightlight data. The image for Kashgar City, in particular, "brings the clearest evidence there may still be detainees on-site".

This image (see first page) shows a large crowd of people on a football pitch in the middle of the camp. He also points out the large number of vehicles around and inside the mega complex. "You can also see what I presume to be several rows of detainees on the lower left hand." Numerous vehicles, buses and trucks were also found on-site at the camp in Kona Sheher (the Uighur name for Shufu county), as well as at the confirmed camp site in Yengisheher (Shule), despite the latter being far more remote than the other two locations, Hudayar notes.

Hudayar is sure that detainees have not been released as the government has promised. "We don't think that is true because I personally had close to 100 relatives in the camps and haven't heard of anyone being released. No-one in our diaspora community has heard of any one of their family members to be released."

When checking the geographical location of camps with increased nightlight activity, Hudayar found that the larger camps have "significantly increased compared with the ones smaller in size".

One expert familiar with the analysis of geospatial details of Xinjiang's camps is Nathan Ruser, a researcher at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. He told *E&T* that they remained largely active and that "some of the lower security [prison camps] have transformed more into dorms for coerced

Re-education camp in Yengisheher county, 5 Jan 2020
(39°21'27.51"N, 76° 3'4.83"E)
SOURCE: PLANET LABS, INC



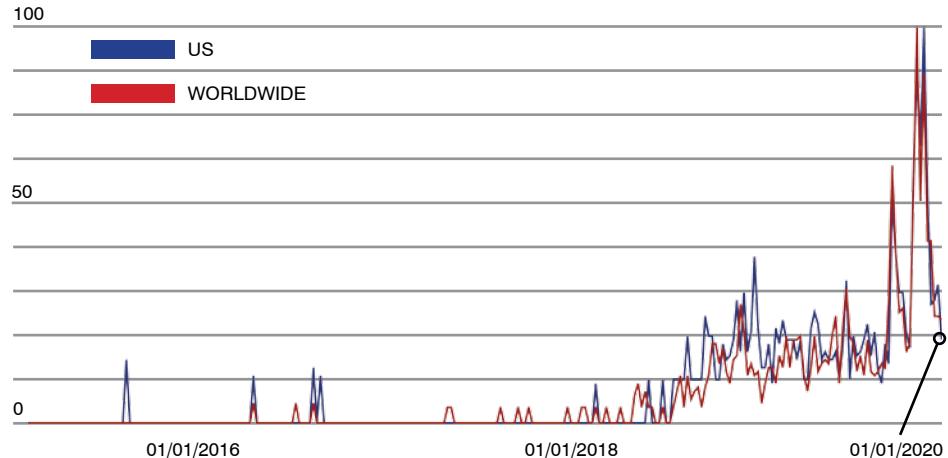
Re-education camp in Kona Sheher county, 1 Jan 2020
(39.33266111°N, 75.68784444°E)
SOURCE: PLANET LABS, INC



Google searches for 'Xinjiang camps'

Searches reached a climax in December 2019

SOURCE: GOOGLE TRENDS • INTEREST OVER TIME: NUMBERS REPRESENT SEARCH INTEREST RELATIVE TO THE HIGHEST POINT ON THE CHART FOR THE GIVEN REGION AND TIME. A VALUE OF 100 IS THE PEAK POPULARITY FOR THE TERM. A VALUE OF 50 MEANS THAT THE TERM IS HALF AS POPULAR. A SCORE OF 0 MEANS THERE WAS NOT ENOUGH DATA FOR THIS TERM.



labour, but [are] certainly still on. I would say maybe 20-35 per cent of detainees have been released, but only into village and neighbourhood arrest or coerced labour."

There are signs that China's strategy in its campaign of surveillance and oppression against the Uighur ethnic group was well planned. Last February, news media reported findings of a large-scale data collection operation. In what was called 'Physicals for All', the Chinese government collected DNA samples, images of irises and other personal data from nearly 36 million people between 2016 and 2017, according to Xinhua (China's official news agency) and human rights groups. It raises questions because Xinjiang has a population of about 24.9 million, according to official data from 2018.

International attention

More people around the world seem to be showing an interest in the human rights situation posed by China's Xinjiang concentration camps. Google search traffic affirms an increased interest for the term 'Xinjiang camps'. Since mid-2018, searches grew more common but climaxed in December, according to data for the US and the rest of the world (see chart).

Last December, the European Parliament urged the government of China to close

re-education camps for Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang region and threatened legislative consequences. "We continue to be gravely concerned about the existence of the so-called political re-education camps. Reliable and multiple sources' research indicates that it has almost certainly affected over one million people," Josep Borrell said in his role as the EU's High Representative for foreign affairs and security policy.

But what can the EU do? Borrell pointed out that the US already imposes sanctions on "Chinese officials, 28 Chinese governmental

institutions and companies for their role in Xinjiang". The EU has not done this because it has a different system. Borrell said attempting to improve the system could mean approving something equivalent to the Magnitsky Act. This is a law that authorises the US government to sanction those it sees as human rights offenders and to freeze their assets and ban them from entering the US.

Borrell finished with: "We will inform you about the work that we have already started. I need unanimity in the Council in order to do such a thing. I will fight for it." *

20–24 APRIL 2020

TRANSFORMATION IS EVERYWHERE. ITS HEART BEATS IN HANNOVER.

For over 70 years we have driven, inspired, led and accompanied the course of industrial transformation. HANNOVER MESSE serves as a window revealing the world of tomorrow.
Be part of it: hannovermesse.com #HM20

HOME OF INDUSTRIAL PIONEERS

HANNOVER MESSE