

Input on Enforced Disappearances in the Context of Transnational Repression

**A Closer Examination of Enforced Disappearances as a Tool of
Repression Against Human Rights Defenders and Activists**

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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership-based organisation. Its members include indigenous peoples, minorities, unrecognised States, and occupied territories that have joined together to defend their political, social, and cultural rights, as well as their right to self-determination.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This submission is prepared by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), and examines the use of enforced disappearances as a tool of repression in the context of transnational repression. It seeks to draw attention to the specific and disproportionate impact of this practice on unrepresented nations and peoples. The submission argues that enforced disappearance in this context is not merely an isolated or incidental violation, but rather a systemic and strategic practice used by states to neutralise dissent, intimidate diaspora communities, and extend coercive power beyond territorial borders.

The International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPPED), adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 2006, defines enforced disappearances as the “arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the State or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the State, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law”.¹ As of August 2025, only 77 States out of 197 Member States have ratified the Convention, while 39 states have signed the Convention without ratifying it, and 81 States have taken no formal steps toward ratification or accession.² Notably, major powers such as China, Iran, and Russia have not engaged with the Convention, a gap that is particularly consequential given their roles in patterns of enforced disappearance and transnational repression, as well as their significant geopolitical influence.³

Although enforced disappearance is prohibited under international law, it continues to be employed systematically by states both within and beyond their territorial borders, often with near-total impunity. This absence of accountability has enabled enforced disappearances to function as a tool of transnational repression, forming part of broader, coordinated patterns of repression directed against unrepresented nations and peoples.

UNPO has long engaged with the UN, the European Union, and other international bodies to draw attention to the threats faced by unrepresented communities worldwide. A central and growing concern of this work is transnational repression, understood as the practices of governments reaching across borders to silence dissent among diaspora members and exiles.

¹ United Nations General Assembly, *International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, G.A. Res. 61/177, U.N. Doc. A/RES/61/177 (2006), art. 2, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/61/177>.

² United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance*, A/80/298, 80th session, 4 August 2025, United Nations Digital Library, [https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/298#:~:text=Convention%20for%20the-,Protection%20of%20All%20Persons%20from%20Enforced%20Disappearance,provisions%20of%20the%20Convention%20\(art.](https://docs.un.org/en/A/80/298#:~:text=Convention%20for%20the-,Protection%20of%20All%20Persons%20from%20Enforced%20Disappearance,provisions%20of%20the%20Convention%20(art.)

³ Ibid.

Over the past decade, UNPO has monitored the increasing scale and severity of transnational reprisals carried by authoritarian states, predominantly Iran, Russia, and China. Since 2016, UNPO's *Compromised Spaces* project has documented how such states target activists, journalists, and human rights defenders abroad.⁴

Drawing on the experiences of various UNPO members, including Crimean Tatars, Uyghurs, Tibetans,⁵ Baloch and Iranian Kurds,⁶ this submission illustrates how enforced disappearances function as one of the most severe and definitive forms of transnational repression. It further shows how the denial of equal representation, political participation and the right to self-determination places unrepresented communities at increased risk of such abuses.

II. THE DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON UNREPRESENTED NATIONS AND PEOPLES

Unrepresented nations and peoples – whose right to self-determination is systematically denied and who are excluded from decision-making at national, regional and international levels – face particular vulnerabilities to transnational repression. In the absence of formal representation, these communities encounter significant barriers in accessing international human rights mechanisms or effective domestic remedies. Advocacy for cultural rights, greater autonomy, or political recognition is frequently perceived by states as an existential threat, rendering activists from unrepresented communities particularly susceptible to targeting. Moreover, many unrepresented peoples live in legal or political grey zones, including under occupied territories, stateless contexts, or contested jurisdictions, where disappearances are easier to conceal and accountability harder to secure.

This disproportionate impact is evident across multiple contexts. Crimean Tatars,⁷ who constitute approximately 13 per cent of the population of Crimea, account for around 60 per cent of documented enforced disappearances since the Russian occupation began in 2014. Uyghurs have faced similar patterns,⁸ with Chinese authorities engaging in arbitrary detention, deportations, and enforced disappearances of community members both within China and abroad.

These cases demonstrate that enforced disappearances function both within home territories and across borders, creating fear and uncertainty that suppress advocacy and civic engagement among unrepresented nations and peoples worldwide. At the same time, these practices pose a

⁴ "Compromised Spaces," Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, accessed January 19, 2026, <https://unpo.org/compromised-spaces/>.

⁵ UNPO, *Tibet*, <https://unpo.org/member/tibet/>.

⁶ UNPO, *Iranian Kurdistan*, <https://unpo.org/member/iranian-kurdistan/>.

⁷ UNPO, *Crimean Tatars*, <https://unpo.org/member/crimean-tatars/>.

⁸ UNPO, *East Turkestan*, <https://unpo.org/member/east-turkestan/>.

broader risk – they endanger citizens in third countries, erode rule of law, undermine the credibility of states that employ them, and produce lasting consequences that extend well beyond the immediate victims.⁹

III. ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE AS A TOOL OF TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION

Transnational repression encompasses a wide range of tactics and strategies used by states to silence dissidents, including diasporas members and exiles abroad. These tactics include political assassinations, digital threats, intimidation of friends and family, enforced disappearances, and illegal deportations.¹⁰ Among them, enforced disappearance stands apart from other forms of repression as one of the most radical and definitive instruments used by states. While surveillance intimidates, digital threats harass, and smear campaigns discredit, enforced disappearance achieves complete erasure, removing individuals entirely from legal protection. It severs all communication, obstructs access to remedies and places families in prolonged uncertainty. In the Uyghur context, family members have described this uncertainty as “much more painful than death itself.”

Most critically, enforced disappearances produce a chilling effect that silences not only individual victims but entire communities. This deterrent effect is central to understanding enforced disappearances as a tool of transnational repression. A chilling effect refers to state action that discourages individuals and legal persons from exercising their rights or fulfilling professional or civic roles due to fear of sanctions or other adverse consequences.¹¹ In essence, the very nature of a chilling effect is deterrence.¹²

In the transnational context, this deterrent effect operates bi-directionally. Enforced disappearances abroad signal to those at home that escape offers no protection, while reprisals (often in the form of enforced disappearances) against family members send a clear warning to diaspora communities that advocacy may carry severe consequences for loved ones who remain.

⁹ UNPO, *Lessons in Resilience: Insights from the Secretary-General of UNPO* (December 2025), <https://academy.unpo.org/lessons-in-resilience-insights-from-the-secretary-general-of-unpo/>.

¹⁰ Nate Schenkkan and Isabel Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach: The Global Scale and Scope of Transnational Repression* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2021), 1.

¹¹ Laurent Pech, “The Concept of Chilling Effect: Its Untapped Potential to better Protect Democracy, the Rule of Law, and Fundamental Rights in the EU,” *Open Society* (2021): 4, <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/publications/the-concept-of-chilling-effect>.

¹² Frederick Schauer, “Fear, Risk and the First Amendment: Unravelling the Chilling Effect,” *Boston University Law Review* 685-732 (1978): 689, <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/facpubs/879/>.

The case of Ervin Ibragimov illustrates this dynamic. A Crimean Tatar activist and member of the World Congress of Crimean Tatars, Ibragimov was forcibly disappeared on 24 May 2016 in Bakhchysarai.¹³ CCTV footage shows him being stopped by individuals in traffic police uniforms, forced into a vehicle, and driven away. His fate and whereabouts remain unknown and despite clear visual evidence, no effective investigation has been carried out. His disappearance has become one of the most emblematic cases of enforced disappearance in occupied Crimea, functioning not only as an individual violation but as a broader warning against Crimean Tatar dissent.

The impact of enforced disappearance therefore extends far beyond the immediate victim, deterring communities from exercising their rights to freedom of expression, association, and political participation. This effect is particularly acute within diaspora communities, where fear of direct reprisal or harm to family members at home leads to widespread self-censorship. Tibetan exile communities, for instance, report that even the risk of disappearance while traveling through third countries with close ties to China is sufficient to suppress activism. Importantly, it is often the *possibility* of disappearance or arbitrary detention, rather than its frequent occurrence, that already functions as a powerful deterrent.

This chilling effect should not be overlooked. Its reciprocal nature blurs the line between domestic human rights violations and extraterritorial intimidation, highlighting the critical yet frequently neglected dimension of transnational repression. Recognising and addressing this dynamic is essential to fully understanding, and effectively responding to, enforced disappearances in their broader transnational context.

IV. PATHWAYS OF TRANSNATIONAL ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Transnational repression operates through a range of mechanisms, of which enforced disappearances constitute only one. While this submission highlights select case studies, enforced disappearances are experienced by many other UNPO members and unrepresented communities. Documenting these cases presents persistent challenges. The lack of formal recognition faced by unrepresented communities, together with the inherent difficulties of tracking abuses that occur across borders, makes it increasingly difficult to systematically record and verify cases or maintain up-to-date data. As a result, the true scope and scale of transnational enforced disappearances remains significantly underreported.

a. Direct Transnational Disappearances

¹³ "Ukraine: Crimean Tatar activist forcibly disappeared: Ervin Ibragimov," Amnesty International, May 26, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur50/4121/2016/en/>.

The most overt form of transnational enforced disappearance involves the direct abduction of individuals abroad by agents acting on behalf of perpetrating states. These actions often rely on covert operatives, manipulation of border controls, or the use of local proxies. Activists travelling or residing in third countries may be stopped by unidentified persons, forcibly removed and subsequently disappeared.

The case of Kurdish poet and activist Hossein Bagheri (also known as Zhakan Baran) illustrates this pathway. Bagheri played a prominent role in the *Women, Life, Freedom* movement and was repeatedly threatened by Iranian security forces as a result. He was even publicly named on Iranian state television, where he was publicly threatened with arrest and death.¹⁴ In the spring of 2023, while residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Bagheri disappeared while traveling to Turkey. No verified information regarding his fate or whereabouts has since emerged.

b. Forced Returns and Deportations

Beyond direct abductions, states increasingly rely on migration enforcement mechanisms (such as deportations, extraditions, or forced returns) to transfer individuals into jurisdictions where they are subsequently disappeared. These practices are frequently facilitated through the misuse of Interpol red notices, vague terrorism or national security designations, or irregular migration enforcement, in violation of non-refoulement obligations.

Uyghur communities have been particularly affected by this mechanism. Under the guise of counter-terrorism, states have unlawfully deported Uyghurs to China.¹⁵ In February 2025, for example, the Government of Thailand deported 40 Uyghurs to China after they had been detained in various Thai facilities for more than a decade.¹⁶ Furthermore and given that China classifies Türkiye as a "sensitive" country, Uyghurs returned from there face a heightened risk of detention, interrogation, torture, and disappearance upon arrival. Many are transferred to re-education camps or secret facilities, with their whereabouts unknown to families abroad.

Türkiye's treatment of Uyghur refugees further illustrates this mechanism, with Uyghurs increasingly finding it difficult to seek refuge under the Turkish immigration system. Uyghur refugees in Türkiye are subjected to arbitrary "restriction codes", most commonly G87, designating them as "public security threats" without credible evidence.¹⁷ These codes carry

¹⁴ Hengaw, *Enforced disappearance as a tool of the Islamic Republic of Iran to erase crimes – List of victims after the Woman, Life, Freedom movement* (2025).

<https://hengaw.net/en/reports-and-statistics-1/2025/09/article-2>

¹⁵ Schenkkan and Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, 17.

¹⁶ Special Procedures mandate holders of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Communication to the Government of China, Ref. AL CHN (8/2025), 26 May 2025," OHCHR, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownLoadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=29977>.

¹⁷ "Türkiye: 'Restriction Codes' Harm Uyghurs Seeking Safety," Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/11/12/turkiye-restriction-codes-harm-uyghurs-seeking-safety>.

severe consequences, resulting in the denial of citizenship, international protection, or lawful residency, effectively rendering individuals “irregular migrants” and exposing them to incommunicado detention and deportation. In June 2019, a Uyghur woman and her two young children were deported to Tajikistan and reportedly transferred onward to China. At the same time, albeit less formally, the Chinese government relies on “networks of Uyghur informants in Turkey”, who are also victims of repression, to obtain information that can be used to coerce silence.¹⁸ Between 200 and 400 Uyghurs were detained in Turkey in 2019 alone, demonstrating how host-state cooperation, often under political pressure, directly facilitates the reach of China’s transnational enforced disappearance.¹⁹

In similar circumstances, the government of Pakistan often employs bureaucratic and transnational tools, such as rendering passports useless, using the Exit Control List (ECL), and transnational repression, as a “silent war” to silence dissent from journalists, political activists and unrepresented communities such as the Baloch.²⁰ By revoking passports, delaying renewals, requesting politically motivated deportations, abusing Interpol notices, and listing individuals on the secretive “Fourth Schedule,” the government effectively exiles critics and scholars, and bars journalists like from travel, making the cost of speaking out the loss of one’s career, family, home, and future.

Examples of this include the case of Gillam Wazir, laborer from Waziristan working in Bahrain to support his family. Due to his connection to the Pashtun community, he became a target of the Pakistani government. In 2022, following a request from Pakistan’s Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), Bahraini authorities detained Gillam. Despite having valid residency, he was denied legal recourse and forcibly deported to Pakistan. Upon landing in Islamabad, he was not released. He was immediately taken into custody by Pakistani security agencies and subjected to enforced disappearance, held incommunicado without charge. After pressure, he was formally charged under anti-terrorism laws.²¹

c. Abuse of Legal and Administrative Systems

States also manipulate legal and administrative frameworks to enable transnational enforced disappearance. Interpol’s red notice system, designed to facilitate legitimate law enforcement cooperation, has been systematically abused by authoritarian states issuing notices based on fabricated terrorism, extremism, or national security charges. . Human rights risks and political

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2023),

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/>.

¹⁹ Schenkkan and Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, 19.

²⁰ UNPO, *Balochistan*, <https://unpo.org/member/balochistan/>.

²¹ Report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

motivations are frequently insufficiently assessed, and host states often detain individuals solely on the basis of such notices without independent review.

Once detained, individuals are rendered or deported to states where they face disappearance. Russia has used Interpol mechanisms as part of broader efforts to pursue and silence Crimean Tatar critics. China has exploited red notices to facilitate the forced return of Uyghurs from Turkey, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Iran has weaponised Interpol cooperation to locate and target Kurdish activists in neighboring countries. While Interpol's Commission for the Control of Interpol's Files can review notices, it operates reactively and lacks the capacity or mandate to systematically prevent abuse.

Representatives from the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) have reported that enforced disappearances often begin with arbitrary detention abroad, justified through immigration violations, Interpol red notices, or vague national security claims. Individuals are frequently held without access to legal counsel, family, or consular protection, and once forcibly returned to China, are subjected to widespread and arbitrary deprivation of liberty, with their whereabouts unknown.

d. Transnational Repression in the Digital Age

Advances in surveillance technology, facial recognition and digital platforms have expanded states' capacity to identify, locate, monitor, intimidate and target individuals abroad. Digital transnational repression now plays a central role in facilitating enforced disappearances by enabling states to locate and coordinate action against dissidents in exile. The advent of these digital tools has meant that the effect of transnational repression has become far more pervasive.²²

In China, for example, the state has utilised advanced digital technology to "monitor and control discussion among the diaspora" and to track Uyghurs.²³ Platforms such as WeChat have been used to directly contact and harass members of the community. Overseas Uyghur activists face threats and retaliation against their families in East Turkestan. This creates fear in the Uyghur diaspora, silencing many from speaking out despite living in democratic countries. It was recently reported that the Public Security Bureau of Shanghai's Songjiang District developed a software that was capable of detecting Uyghurs arriving in Shanghai through facial recognition

²² "Q&A: Transnational Repression," Human Rights Watch, accessed January 10, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/12/qa-transnational-repression>.

²³ Schenck and Linzer, *Out of Sight, Not Out of Reach*, 16.

cameras.²⁴ Practices, such as these, heighten the risk of enforced disappearance by equipping states with the necessary means to locate, target, and abduct individuals across borders.

e. Family Reprisals

A distinctive dimension of transnational repression is the targeting of family members of activists living abroad. Relatives are threatened, detained, or disappeared as a means of coercion, creating a radius of fear that transcends borders and compels diaspora communities to self-censor or disengage from advocacy activities.

Family members of activists are deliberately targeted by authoritarian states as a form of collective punishment and coercive leverage. By disappearing family members in the homeland, states force activists abroad to choose between advocacy and family safety, deter engagement with international mechanisms, and undermine the protective purpose of asylum.

The case of Dr. Gulshan Abbas exemplifies this tactic. The sister of the US-based Uyghur activist, Rushan Abbas, Dr. Abbas disappeared in 2018 after her sister publicly addressed Uyghur repression.²⁵ Today, she remains imprisoned in China without access to due process. Her detention functions as both punishment for her family and a warning to the diaspora community.

f. The *Bi-directional Chilling Effect*

A critical yet overlooked dimension of transnational enforced disappearance is its reciprocal chilling effect. Traditionally, chilling effects describe how state action deters individuals from exercising their rights. In the transnational context, this deterrence operates in both directions – it creates fear that flows both from homeland to diaspora and from diaspora back to homeland.

Disappearances abroad signal to those at home that flight offers no protection, discouraging escape and undermining hope in international advocacy. At the same time, reprisals against family members warn diaspora communities that activism may carry severe consequences for loved ones. This bidirectional dynamic collapses the distinction between domestic repression and transnational intimidation, creating a seamless environment in which geography provides no meaningful safety.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, 2023 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: China, (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of State, 2023),

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/china/>.

²⁵ EU parliament urges China to release Uyghur doctor Gulshan Abbas, economist Ilham Tohti,” International Service for Human Rights, October 10, 2024, <https://ishr.ch/latest-updates/eu-parliament-urges-china-to-release-uyghur-doctor-gulshan-abbas-economist-ilham-tohti/>.

Recognising this reciprocal chilling effect is essential to understanding the full scope and devastating impact of transnational enforced disappearances.

V. CONCLUSION

Enforced disappearances represent one of the most severe and systematic tools of transnational repression, employed not only to eliminate individual dissent but to instill fear across entire communities. For unrepresented nations and peoples – whose political rights, cultural expression, and access to justice are already restricted – this tactic has disproportionately devastating effects. As illustrated through the cases of Crimean Tatars, Uyghurs, Tibetans, Baloch and Iranian Kurds, enforced disappearances operate across borders, exploiting legal and administrative systems, digital surveillance, and family reprisals to silence advocacy, suppress cultural expression, and undermine the fundamental rights of entire populations.

The impact of such disappearances extends far beyond the immediate victim. They generate a bidirectional chilling effect, deterring political engagement and activism both at home and in diaspora communities, while blurring the line between domestic violations and extraterritorial intimidation. This systematic pattern highlights the urgent need for stronger international mechanisms to prevent enforced disappearances, hold states accountable, and safeguard unrepresented peoples from the unique vulnerabilities created by their lack of representation. Recognising and addressing the strategic, transnational nature of enforced disappearances is essential for protecting human rights, defending cultural diversity, and upholding the rule of law in an interconnected world.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the above, UNPO recommends that the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) and Committee on Enforced Disappearance (CED):

1. **Strengthen engagement with non-State Parties to the ICPPED** - The Working Group and Committee should intensify dialogue, public reporting, and advocacy efforts directed at States that have not ratified the ICPPED, including China, Iran, and Russia.
2. **Enhance cooperation with host States to prevent extraterritorial disappearances** - The Working Group and Committee should encourage States of residence to adopt safeguards against illegal deportations, renditions, and cooperation with foreign security services, including stricter scrutiny of extradition requests, migration enforcement actions, and the misuse of Interpol mechanisms.

3. **Strengthen protection measures for activists and human rights defenders targeted transnationally** - Protect activists, journalists, and human rights defenders who are at heightened risk of enforced disappearance both within their home countries and abroad, recognising that State actors (particularly authoritarian States) increasingly engage in coercive transnational practices to silence dissent and human rights advocacy.
4. **Integrate family reprisals into the analysis of enforced disappearance** - The Working Group and Committee should additionally recognise the targeting of family members remaining in the country of origin as an integral component of transnational repression. Family members are often detained, threatened, and sometimes even a victim of enforced disappearance themselves. This constitutes a coercive extension of enforced disappearance.
5. **Document and respond to the chilling effect on diaspora communities** - The Working Group and Committee should explicitly consider the broader societal impact of enforced disappearances used transnationally, including the chilling effect on freedom of expression, association, and political participation among diaspora communities and civil society actors.
6. **Address digital technologies as enablers of enforced disappearances** - In line with Human Rights Council Resolution 58/23, the Working Group should monitor and document how the use of digital surveillance, facial recognition, social media monitoring, and hacking facilitate enforced disappearances and cross-border intimidation by enabling the identification, tracking, and targeting of individuals across borders.
7. **Ensure protection and access to remedies for victims and families abroad** - The Working Group and Committee should advocate for accessible complaint mechanisms, protection measures, and legal remedies for victims of transnational enforced disappearance and their families, including those residing outside the country responsible for the violation.