

Australian offers candid observation of Xinjiang distinct from Western characterizations

Upon reading the news the US Congress passed the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020 to sanction China over Xinjiang affairs, Jerry Grey looked online to see how many members of Congress have been to China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

"The answer - Zero. EU tried - US objected; UN tried - US objected," he tweeted, asking, "Why [the US] legislate on something with no knowledge?"

While talking to the Global Times about his views on the US bill on Xinjiang, Grey said, "I feel this is a gross miscarriage of justice - first of all, the US has no right to involve itself in China's affairs and secondly, if they are going to purport to be a 'world police service' they should surely attend the 'scene of the crime' before making decision on how to react to it."

The 62-year-old retiree has drawn his own conclusions about the region after cycling about 5,000 kilometers across Xinjiang for charity in 2019. He said that while security may be heavy, the Xinjiang government has every reason to take precautions so its people feel safe and can live a better life.

Riding in Xinjiang

Grey, a British born Australian citizen, currently lives in Zhongshan, South China's Guangdong Province. In August 2019, Grey and his wife, Ann Liang Yuhua, decided to initiate the charity ride from Urumqi to Zhongshan. Along with Grey's friend Bevan Cobbe, they rode for a charity project called "Riding for love," which raises money to help disabled people in Zhongshan.

The team of three flew to Urumqi to begin their ride. "We assembled our bikes in the hotel car park and then the next morning we started riding out of Urumqi back toward Gansu," Grey said.

"It is a long distance of course. It is quite common for me to ride 70 kilometers in one day. Over the long ride, you do it more regularly. So we rode out of Urumqi for three or four days, then we stopped in Turpan. We had a night and day off there," he said, speaking of his experience in Xinjiang.

After Turpan, they then headed to the city of Hami. Every three or four days they took a day to rest. The climate in Xinjiang was "really really extreme; it's a desert and quite mountainous."

As for his impression of Xinjiang, Grey shared his observation based on his experience working as a police officer for 10 years in London.

Referencing the bombing campaigns by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) he witnessed in the 1970s, Grey said he knows "what terrorism looks like."

"I'm realistic enough to know that the military, the police, the government, they have a reason for putting people in prison. If somebody bombs civilians, if somebody wants to put a bomb outside the police station, that person deserves to be in prison. That's all the reason to it in my opinion," Grey stressed.

When he was working as a police officer, he saw the damage a bomb can do to pedestrians and to people in shopping centers, so he does not want to see that again. "If the Chinese government says 'This is our way to stop it,' I'm quite happy with that."

"The first thing that happened when we arrived in Xinjiang was you actually arrived and go through security," Grey said, which he found unusual.

"Because usually when you get off a plane, you've been through security and you just go straight into the city. But you arrive and then go through security," he said.

"When you get to your hotel, you go through a metal detector. For us, that was rather strange, but I understand," he noted, going on to explain his thoughts on the high level of security.

It is a level of security that doesn't make me feel very comfortable because I don't like it. I'm not used to it, but I don't feel unsafe because of it."

Grey asked residents what they thought of all the security.

"When I talked to people and asked questions... if they were unhappy with it, I would be able to understand and see that they were unhappy. But every single person that I spoke to said the same thing; 'We feel safe, it's better. This is better than it was before,'" he elaborated.

Seeing is believing

Grey also said he sees a difference between the Xinjiang portrayed in Western media and the land he saw with his own eyes.

"I heard and saw the language is very much alive. People speak their local language. And every shop, every menu, every restaurant has their local language written there, so when I read that the local language was being destroyed, I disagree with that."

He also read Xinjiang's local culture has been destroyed, "but we went to a restaurant, where they had dancers. This was not a tourist restaurant; this was just a normal restaurant. They sing and they dance. That's what Uygurs tend to do when they are having fun."

Grey noted he did not see evidence of concentration camps during his entire journey along the various roads in Xinjiang.

"No policeman has ever said to me, 'Can I see your camera, can I see what pictures you've got.' In other words, they are not afraid of me taking photographs of anything that I see. If they were afraid, they would stop me going there first; if I did go there without permission, they would want to see my photographs, nobody ever did. That tells they are not trying to hide anything."

On Twitter, Grey is quite open to debate and he also asks questions when people argue with him over Xinjiang.

In these debates, the first question he would ask is "Have you ever been to Xinjiang?"

"You got to see to know something," Grey noted.

"If you talk about a free 'Turkistan' inside of China, the police are coming to get you. It's the same in the UK, when people start to talk about freeing Northern Ireland... then you'd get into trouble with the police. If somebody in Alaska wants independence from the United States, the FBI will be knocking at their door, it's no difference."