

China demolished thousands of Xinjiang mosques in recent years - report

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Chinese authorities have demolished thousands of mosques in Xinjiang, an Australian think tank said on Friday, in the latest report of widespread human rights abuses in the restive region.

Rights groups say more than **one million Uighurs and other mostly Muslim Turkic-speaking people have been incarcerated in camps** across the northwestern territory, with residents pressured to give up traditional and religious activities.

Around 16,000 mosques had been destroyed or damaged, according to an Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) report based on satellite imagery documenting hundreds of sacred sites and statistical modelling.

By contrast, none of the Christian churches and Buddhist temples in Xinjiang that were studied by the think tank had been damaged or destroyed.

ASPI also said **nearly a third of major Islamic sacred sites in Xinjiang** – including shrines, cemeteries and pilgrimage routes – **had been razed**.

An AFP investigation last year found dozens of cemeteries had been destroyed in the region, leaving human remains and bricks from broken tombs scattered across the land.

China has insisted that residents of Xinjiang enjoy full religious freedom.

Asked about the research on Friday, China's foreign ministry said the research institute had "*no academic credibility*" and was producing "*anti-China reports and anti-China lies*".

Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said there were about 24,000 mosques in the region.

"Xinjiang's total number of mosques is more than ten times the number in the US, and the average number of mosques per Muslim person is higher than in some Muslim countries," Wang told a regular press briefing.

Most of the destruction had taken place in the last three years and an estimated 8,500 mosques had been completely destroyed, the report said, with more damage outside the urban centres of Urumqi and Kashgar.

Many mosques that escaped demolition had their domes and minarets removed, according to the research, which estimated fewer than 15,500 intact and damaged mosques were left standing around Xinjiang.

If correct, it would be the lowest number of Muslim houses of worship in the region since the decade of national upheaval sparked by the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

Friday's report comes a day after ASPI said it had identified a network of detention centres in the region much larger than previous estimates.

Beijing has said its network of camps are vocational training centres, which are necessary for countering poverty and anti-extremism.