

Solar panels used by British Army linked to claims of forced labour in China

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BRITISH ARMY

Project Prometheus opened its first solar farm at the Defence School of Transport in 2021

By Joshua Nevett

Political reporter, BBC News

The British Army is using solar panels made by companies claimed to have a "very high" exposure to forced labour in China, the BBC can reveal.

The production of solar panels in the Xinjiang region has been linked to the alleged exploitation of Uyghur Muslims.

The British Army is investing £100m in solar panels across four of its sites.

The Ministry of Defence listed JA Solar, Trina and Qcells as the solar panel suppliers in response to a BBC Freedom of Information request.

A report in July this year by the UK's Sheffield Hallam University flags the three companies as having "very high" exposure to production in Xinjiang.

JA Solar and Qcells told the BBC they were taking action to make sure forced labour had no part in their supply chains, but Trina didn't reply to requests for comment.

A Ministry of Defence spokesperson said: "We have robust procedures in place that allow us to vet and routinely monitor all aspects of our supply chain which is kept under constant review."

But Alan Crawford, one of the authors of the Sheffield Hallam report, said he had seen the list of companies obtained by the BBC and he believed his findings still stood.

As a chemical engineer with extensive experience of supplier identification, he said big solar firms were unlikely to buy components they knew for certain were the products of forced labour.

But, he added, there was a "lack of transparency" in the supply chain, which led some firms to "hide behind" their "anti slavery declarations".

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak is facing calls to take a harder line against China and to end the UK's reliance on solar production from the country.

Senior Conservative MP Alicia Kearns is urging the UK government to "sanction and impose a ban on any solar company with links to Uyghur forced labour from operating in the UK".

The US has accused the Chinese government of arbitrarily detaining more than one million Uyghurs and other mostly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang prison camps.

In state sponsored programmes, detainees are forced to produce goods including polysilicon, a core ingredient in solar panels, according to the US Department of Labor.

The Chinese government has always staunchly denied all allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang.

Ms Kearns, who chairs the Commons foreign affairs committee, told the BBC there was "an ever growing mass of evidence linking the solar industry to the forced labour and genocide of the Uyghur people in China".

The MP said the UK Ministry of Defence's "exposure via solar investments is indicative of the scale of the issue, which will only get worse as the UK continues to lag behind international partners in acting".

Global dominance

Solar power is huge source of renewable energy and one of the cornerstones of the international effort to curb climate warming carbon emissions.

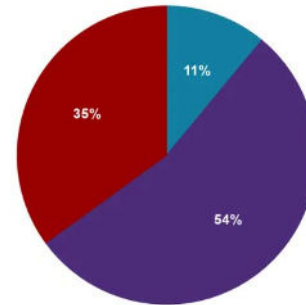
China has dominated the market and, according to the International Energy Agency, the country's global share in all the manufacturing stages of solar panels exceeds 80%.

It's a dilemma for the UK, which imports a large portion of its solar panels from China.

The British Army's use of Chinese made solar panels comes as no surprise to Yalkun Uluylol.

Polysilicon market share in 2022

International China interior Uyghur region



Source: Bernreuter Research

BBC

An academic native of Xinjiang, Mr Uluylol has been researching the links between Chinese manufacturers and alleged forced labour in his home region.

Mr Uluylol said his research found forced labour "happens almost everywhere in every sector".

The evidence for this, he added, can be found in official Chinese records and the personal experiences of Uyghurs like members of his family.

He said relatives including his father had been held in detention camps, with some "taken away to work in facilities".

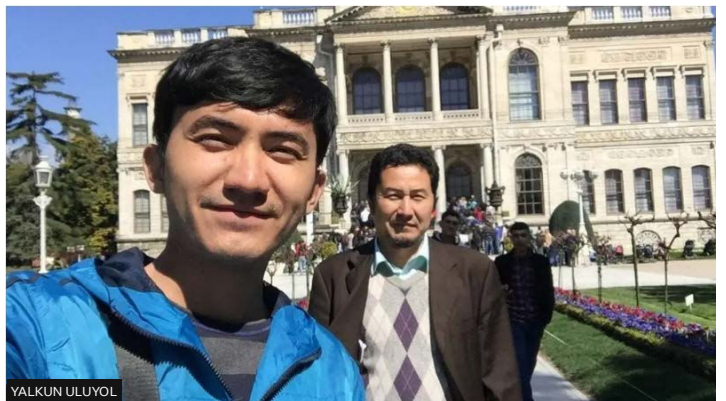
"Renewable energy means respect for human rights and respect for the environment," Mr Uluylol said. "Both are absent from the Uyghur region."

Mr Uluylol's conclusions are shared by the US government, which has passed a law that requires companies to prove that goods imported from Xinjiang were not produced with forced labour.

The US has been blocking shipments of solar energy components since passing the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in August 2021.

Project Prometheus began in the same year, as allegations of forced labour in solar supply chains came into sharper focus.

The fourth and final site which is using solar panels made by JA Solar, a Chinese company, was due to open at Dock Barracks in Suffolk this year.



YALKUN ULUYLOL

Yalkun Uluylol said his father Memet Yaqup had been detained in Xinjiang for unknown reasons

Asked to comment on the Sheffield Hallam report, Michael Parr, a solar expert who works with Qcells, said there was "no doubt that the broad assessment was pretty fair".

"It's really challenging to do an airtight independent audit in China," said Mr Parr, the executive director of the Ultra Low Carbon Solar Alliance.

"It's difficult to get clear data from the companies. Most of the wafer supply comes from numerous companies and they often blend. Even companies who are buying polysilicon from the US and Europe are reliant on China."

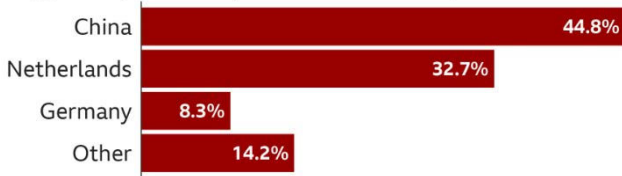
When told the British Army was using solar panels made by JA Solar, Trina and Qcells, Mr Parr said: "Europe has been less attentive to the risk of forced labour in solar than the US".

He said he would "differentiate" between the three companies supplying panels for Project Prometheus.

He said while Trina and JA Solar were Chinese manufacturers "with the vast majority of their manufacturing" in China, Qcells was a South Korean company that's "done a lot of work on trying to clean up their supply chains".

The UK relies on China for solar materials

Biggest suppliers of photovoltaic cells by value in 2022*



*Cells imported as part of modules or panels

Source: HMRC

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In recent years, solar companies have taken steps to sever ties with Xinjiang.

Some have diversified their production to cut out the region, while the solar industry has tried to improve its monitoring of supply chains.

A spokesperson for JA Solar said the company was "strongly committed to ensuring that our operations and supply chain are free from any form of forced labour".

"JA Solar has due diligence mechanisms in place, reviews its suppliers and has several ongoing projects to further enhance the traceability of all JA Solar modules," it added.

A spokesperson for Segen, which supplied JA Solar panels to Project Prometheus, said the company was "committed to achieving a traceable supply chain and has processes in place".

The spokesperson said the UK solar sector was "driving best practice" through a scheme to encourage common standards of production and oversight.

Qcells said it took "the forced labour issue very seriously, which is why we do everything we can to track and monitor our supply chain".

A spokesperson said Qcells had adopted a code of conduct that "prohibits forced-labour made products in our supply chain and we terminate agreements if suppliers fail to comply".

Qcells had invested "billions of dollars" in "an entirely American supply chain to produce polysilicon-based solar panels", the spokesperson added.

Trina did not respond to requests for comment.