

Senators push for more oversight after warning solar industry 'exposed' to China's Xinjiang human rights violations

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China's Xinjiang province is home to around half of the world's supply of polysilicon, a key ingredient in solar panels. (ABC News: Emilia Terzon)

A group of senators, human rights experts and lawyers are calling on the federal government to assure Australian consumers that the solar industry is not exposed to grave human rights abuses in China's Xinjiang province.

The United Nations and countries including Australia have expressed concerns about China persecuting the Uyghur minority in the region. Foreign Minister Marise Payne has said there is clear evidence of mass surveillance, extra-judicial detention, restriction on freedom of religion and forced labour.

Xinjiang province is home to around half of the world's supply of polysilicon — a key ingredient needed to manufacture solar panels — and the vast majority of solar panels sold in Australia are built in China.

Key points:

- China has been accused of persecuting the Uyghur minority in the Xinjiang region
- Xinjiang produces a key ingredient needed to manufacture solar panels
- A researcher says the solar industry's exposure to forced labour is clear

Professor of human rights at the Helena Kennedy Centre for International Justice, Laura Murphy, says some Uyghurs are being forced to produce this mineral and that as a result, the global supply chain is exposed to modern slavery.

"If the Australian government or Australian developers or even Australian consumers are buying modules from China, then they are seriously exposed," Professor Murphy told the ABC.

"Nearly everyone in the world who is buying solar panels is likely to be buying products made with forced labour."

China has strenuously denied allegations of forced labour and the Chinese embassy in Canberra was approached for comment on this story.

But Professor Murphy says the solar industry's exposure to forced labour — either directly or indirectly through the supply chain — is clear given her team's analysis of Chinese company documents, contracts and websites.

"One of the reasons why it is so transparent that there is forced labour going on in this region and in this particular supply chain is that companies overtly celebrate their involvement in these labour programs," Professor Murphy told the ABC.

"Anyone who refused to participate in a labour transfer or a poverty alleviation program sponsored by the state is subject to punishment — it's actually against the law to not participate."

Angus Taylor says Australians 'deserve confidence' in products

In a statement, Energy and Emissions Reduction Minister Angus Taylor told the ABC that "Australians need confidence that when they purchase rooftop solar systems, they will receive what they pay for".

"The government is also supporting the expansion of Australia's domestic manufacturing capability in the solar sector through the Modern Manufacturing Strategy," Mr Taylor said.



Rex Patrick says Australia should not shy away from taking a stance against forced labour in other nations. (ABC News: Matt Roberts)

Solar panels sold in Australia must be approved by the Clean Energy Council and meet industry standards. The council has also been approached for comment.

But independent senator Rex Patrick believes the government should be doing much more and has a bill before federal parliament to stop the importation of any products credibly linked to forced labour.

"If solar panels are being made using slave labour, then under the bill that has passed through the Senate, those products would not be permitted to be brought into Australia," Senator Patrick said.

"They would be stopped at the border."

Senator Patrick said Australia should not shy away from taking a stance against forced labour in other nations because the government or industry may be worried about diplomatic or trade repercussions.

"There's a certain line you draw in the sand when it comes to international relations and genocide is one of those lines," Senator Patrick said.

Labor says 'this is a serious issue'

Labor senator Kimberley Kitching said she was disturbed by the allegations and suggested most Australians would not be aware of the link.

"I think that once people know that their solar panelling is made with forced labour, I don't think they'd want a bar of it," Senator Kitching told the ABC.



Kimberley Kitching says modern slavery is a problem in nations across the world. (News Video)

She said Labor would support mandatory reporting requirements for companies to prove they had no indirect links to forced labour.

"This is a serious issue. It goes to who we are as human beings and who we are as a country and our values," she said.

"If we are importing goods when we are required to turn a blind eye because people are making goods in terrible conditions that we would not countenance, then we are in trouble."

Senator Kitching said any new policy response would need to be "country agnostic" as modern slavery was a problem in nations across the world.

The US banned imports of some solar panel materials earlier this year due to links to forced slavery.

Three companies were also added to the US economic blacklist.

Shortly before the COP26 conference in Glasgow, White House national security advisor Jake Sullivan was asked how the US could continue to expand the solar uptake and take action on imports.

"The President fundamentally believes that we can both take a strong stand against forced labour, against slave labour, anywhere it occurs, including in Xinjiang, and at the same time cultivate and develop a robust, resilient, and effective solar supply chain," Mr Sullivan said.

Editor's note 14/12/2021: The initial version of this story said that the UN and countries including Australia had "accused China" of persecuting the Uyghur minority in the region. This has been changed to instead say that the UN and countries including Australia had "expressed concerns" about the issue.

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