Chinese Uighurs feel state’s long reach

Even those living overseas are being drawn into a mass security crackdown

PARIS

Sitting on the terrace of a Paris cafe, a young Chinese woman glances nervously at her mobile phone as a message from a police officer in her native Xinjiang region pops up.

A member of China’s Muslim Uighur minority, Mariem (name changed to protect identity) travelled halfway around the world to study in France, but has found herself pulled into a mass security crackdown under way back home.

“They want to know where I live, what I do, how I spend the weekend. They want me to give them information about Uighurs here. They threaten my family who beg me do do what they ask,” she said.

Mariem is one of several ethnic Uighurs in France who shared accounts of harassment by Chinese authorities.

AFP saw messages several Uighurs received from the authorities on China’s messaging application WeChat.

“Send me your address and tell me who you work for and what your degree is,” reads a message. “Why don’t you send photos?” another person returning from holidays is asked.

On Monday, Chinese officials were grilled by a UN human rights committee in Geneva over reports that it is holding up to one million Muslims, mostly Uighurs, in camps under cover of a massive anti-terrorism drive.

China has pointed to a series of attacks in Xinjiang by suspected Islamist radicals in recent years as justification for a clampdown in a region with a long history of tensions with Beijing.

But it has called the reports of internment camps “completely untrue”, saying that they are “education and training centres”.

A demonstrator at a protest in Istanbul against China’s treatment of Uighurs. •AFP