



September 16, 2019

António Guterres
Secretary-General
United Nations
New York, NY

Re: China's Human Rights Violations in Xinjiang

Dear Secretary-General,

We, a coalition of five human rights organizations, write to express our deep concern about the arbitrary detention of an estimated more than a million Turkic Muslims in China's Xinjiang region. We appeal to you to add the weight of your office to the growing number of voices speaking out publicly, including the 25 countries that issued a [joint statement](#) on Xinjiang at the United Nations Human Rights Council on July 10. By publicly and unequivocally condemning the Chinese government's abusive policies and calling for the immediate closure of its "political education" camps, you would make an important contribution in addressing one of the most pressing human rights issues of our time and your tenure as Secretary-General.

On International Human Rights Day in 2018, you [stated](#) that human rights "apply to everyone – no matter our race, belief, location or other distinction of any kind. Human rights are universal and eternal." We ask you to make clear to the people of China – including the Muslims of Xinjiang – that those words apply to them too.

We would also caution against any action that might lend credence to Beijing's narrative that the unlawful detention of over a million Uyghurs and other Muslims is a necessary measure to counter terrorism. We were particularly concerned by your spokesman's [response](#) to questions from journalists about the plight of Uyghurs after your latest trip to Beijing in April, when he said that "human rights must be fully respected *in the fight against terrorism and in the prevention of violent extremism.*" While unobjectionable as an abstract proposition, such a statement in the context of Xinjiang gives undue credit to Beijing's dubious justification, while obscuring the core issue – the systematic persecution of an entire ethnic and religious minority on a scale not seen in China for decades.

Furthermore, we note how the Chinese government exploited Under Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov's recent visit to Xinjiang, using the visit in its public messaging to further bolster its false counterterrorism narrative. That visit took place just as the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, was reportedly asking Beijing to agree to terms for a meaningful – not stage-managed – visit. The government's actions surrounding Under Secretary-General Voronkov's visit illustrate the need for all parts of the United Nations system to properly incorporate human rights concerns into their activities and decisions about how to engage with states. It also heightens the need for you to urge the Chinese authorities to grant High Commissioner Bachelet and her experts prompt and unimpeded access to the camps. We also ask that you publicly support the creation of a much-needed UN fact-finding mission to assess the scale and nature of abuses in Xinjiang.

We recognize that your preferred approach with the Chinese government on Xinjiang has been to conduct quiet diplomacy. But to date the Chinese government has been compelled to answer for its actions only after intense public pressure generated by concerned governments, human rights organizations, and the media. So far, Beijing has mounted a defense mainly through carefully stage-managed visits to selected camps in which diplomats and journalists met with detainees who had clearly been prepared to confess that they had been “infected with extremist thought.” A recent announcement by senior local officials that all detainees “have returned to society” is similarly misleading and has no basis in fact. Most recently, Beijing put together a coalition that includes some of the most abusive governments in the world, many of which are themselves under investigation by UN bodies for their abysmal human rights records, to heap praise on China's policies toward the Uyghurs.

Not only have you so far refrained from publicly criticizing China's conduct in Xinjiang, you praised without any qualification Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, in which Xinjiang is a centerpiece, despite the human rights concerns it has raised. The public silence over the mass detention in Xinjiang in the context of such glowing commentary sends a distressing message of abandonment to the millions of Turkic Muslims who live in constant fear for themselves and their families. We would encourage you to meet with representatives of the Uyghur community at your earliest opportunity to hear first-hand of their plight.

We are aware that the Chinese authorities place pressure on governments to keep silent about Xinjiang and China's other human rights issues. Your office undoubtedly faces similar pressure. But you hardly need reminding that the right to liberty, and specifically freedom from arbitrary deprivation of liberty, is an absolutely key human right, which China is legally bound to respect and protect. Violations of the right on this scale and severity require steadfastness and perseverance to bring them to an end. By actively contributing to the growing chorus of global criticism you could help end this large-scale repression of a marginalized community, which may prove to be one of the defining issues of your tenure as Secretary-General.

Respectfully,



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Secretary General
Amnesty International



Kenneth Roth
Executive Director
Human Rights Watch



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International Commission of Jurists



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