



High-Level Virtual UN Event on The Situation of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim Minorities in Xinjiang

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I am grateful to the co-sponsors, both governmental and nongovernmental, for hosting this extremely important event. Human Rights Watch is proud to join with you as a co-sponsor.

Despite the Chinese government's efforts to cover up what it is doing in Xinjiang, the facts are increasingly well known. More than one million Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims have been detained to force them to renounce their culture and religion. A highly intrusive surveillance state has been established in Xinjiang to determine whom to detain. People are often detained for little more than wearing a beard, having a contact overseas, or being too religious. There is an increasing use of forced labor, which infects the cotton and apparel industries throughout China, while Beijing blocks the monitoring of supply chains. There is a shocking reduction in the birth rate among Muslims in Xinjiang – a reported 48.74% – compared to a slight rise in the birth rate in Han Chinese areas. This is an unprecedented decline, according to UN statistics; nothing like happened, even during the Syrian civil war and the Rwandan genocide.

Human Rights Watch recently found that this combination of atrocities amounts to the crime against humanity of persecution – a deliberate effort to deprive Uyghur and other Turkic Muslims of their most fundamental rights, to snuff out their culture and their religion.

The Chinese government claims that this repression is about fighting terrorism, but Beijing does not even pretend that it is a targeted effort. The sweeping, broad-based persecution is a blatant attack on Islam and Uyghur culture. Terrorism is the feeble pretext.

The real challenge we face today is what to do about it.

Beijing calculates that through censorship, propaganda, intimidation, and threats, it can avoid accountability.

- It threatens anyone who speaks about Xinjiang.
- It went to the extraordinary length of disinviting people from today's important event.
- It uses absurd euphemisms, such as calling the mass detention centers that scar the landscape of Xinjiang "vocational training centers."

- It circulates embarrassing propaganda about a Xinjiang filled with people who are happily immersed in song and dance.
- It has led the UN high commissioner through an endless charade of negotiations for access to Xinjiang, clearly hoping that she will never get around to reporting. It pretends that she is welcome to visit at any time, but it means on yet another show tour, rather than the unfettered investigation that she rightfully insists upon.
- It has reduced the UN secretary general to a deeply disturbing silence over one of the world's gravest human rights crimes.
- It has devoted \$1 trillion to the Belt and Road Initiative, which is trumpeted as providing "no strings attached" loans, meaning none of the anti-corruption requirements of transparency that the World Bank insists upon. But these loans are laden with "strings" – conditions – regarding the need to avoid criticizing Beijing for its atrocities in Xinjiang, and to vote with Beijing to quash any UN resolution on China.

Sadly, Beijing's extraordinary efforts have indeed allowed it to proceed with impunity, but the good news is that the tide seems to be turning. A growing number of states have joined together to condemn these grave crimes – most recently 39 governments last October during the UN General Assembly's Third Committee. Today's hearing, co-sponsored by 18 governments, is another important step forward.

But there is more we must do. Will we accept a UN secretary general whose calculated strategy for a second term involves public silence on Xinjiang? Will we encourage the UN high commissioner, while she engages in endless negotiation for unfettered access to Xinjiang, to begin publishing her findings now? She can do that based on remote monitoring, as her office has done for Myanmar and North Korea – indeed, as HRW has repeatedly done for Xinjiang.

As an aside, I am disappointed that she chose not to attend today's hearing. I'm sure she's busy. We all are. But I have a similar global mandate to defend human rights, and I couldn't think of anything more important to do than to join you here today. I certainly wasn't deterred by the commute – all the way to my laptop.

We should start pressing for a UN resolution on Xinjiang – most logically at the UN Human Rights Council. Crimes against humanity deserve a commission of inquiry to collect the evidence and to build the case for prosecution. At minimum, we should press for a resolution of condemnation.

I know that won't be easy. It will require active outreach to nations of all regions. But if we could build a global coalition to defend Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, we should be able to build a global coalition to defend Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Yes, the persecutor is much more powerful, but rights shouldn't vary according to the violator. While Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have silenced the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, I hope that the Muslim-majority members will step forward, as some have begun to do.

Even at the UN Security Council, our aim should be to move today's discussion to the formal halls of the council. A resolution is impossible in light of China's veto, but a procedural vote to place Xinjiang formally on the Security Council's agenda should be possible.

Given that China's veto also blocks access to the International Criminal Court, we should examine alternative avenues to justice, such as the use of universal jurisdiction that several European Governments have used so effectively when ICC access for Syrian war crimes was similarly blocked. And we should consider creating an international investigative mechanism for Xinjiang, similar to what has been done for Syria and Myanmar.

We should tighten rules on supply chains to reverse the "presumption of ignorance". Given the pervasiveness of Uyghur Muslim forced labor in Xinjiang, and the Chinese government's refusal to allow independent monitoring, no news is not good news. No news should be assumed to mean a supply chain's complicity in forced labor. No one should import from Xinjiang, directly or indirectly, under such circumstances. Ignorance is no longer an excuse.

In short, there are things we can do to break the impunity that the Chinese government's censorship, bluster, and threats have sought to underwrite. Today is a very important step in that process. But it is only an early step. The true test of the significance of today's hearing will be the follow-up steps that we all take. Thank you.