

350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor
New York, NY 10118-3299
Tel: +1-212-290-4700
Fax: +1-212-736-1300; 917-591-3452

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April 22, 2019

António Guterres
Secretary-General
United Nations
405 East 42nd Street,
New York, NY, 10017, USA

Re: Forthcoming Visit to China

Dear Secretary-General Guterres,

I write ahead of your visit to China for the April 25-27 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation to urge that you publicly and privately call on Chinese authorities to end their campaign of repression against Turkic Muslims in Xinjiang.

In February you rightly warned the UN Human Rights Council about “a groundswell of xenophobia, racism, and intolerance – including rising anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hatred.” In light of the growing plague of intolerance worldwide, this was an important statement from the top UN official. It is particularly relevant ahead of your visit to China.

Credible [estimates](#) from multiple [sources](#) indicate that more than one million ethnic Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims are being [arbitrarily detained](#) in “[political education](#)” camps across Xinjiang simply because of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, and without any legal process. [Outside](#) the camps, Xinjiang authorities surveil and control every aspect of life, imposing severe restrictions on the freedom of religion, and on the rights to freedoms of expression, association, and movement. The government has targeted members of the Uyghur diaspora, particularly activists and journalists, for harassment and surveillance worldwide. The government has also [pressured](#) dozens of countries to forcibly return Turkic Muslims to China.

The Chinese government initially denied these mass arbitrary detentions. After intense public pressure – from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN treaty body experts and special procedures, journalists, diaspora groups, and human rights organizations including Human Rights Watch – the authorities changed their explanation, insisting the facilities are “vocational training schools,” while failing to explain why children, elderly people, or people with advanced professional skills need such training, or why they cannot contact any of their family members outside the facilities. The global pressure persuaded the government to allow visits by diplomats. While those visits

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were highly choreographed, it showed that the Chinese authorities are susceptible and responsive to sustained and focused public pressure.

While some key UN voices, including the High Commissioner for Human Rights, have repeatedly and publicly expressed concern about the deteriorating human rights situation in Xinjiang, your voice has been noticeably absent, and victims of abuses in China and elsewhere are noticing. Your public silence sends a message, however inadvertent, that their safety and well-being is not the UN Secretary-General's concern.

Private diplomacy can be a useful tool to encourage governments to reorient problematic policies and practices. But private diplomacy alone is rarely effective, and especially not with China. It did not prevent the crisis in Xinjiang and is unlikely to persuade Beijing to end its recent crackdown and growing repression there. Private messaging to China's top leaders can influence their thinking, but publicly speaking out sends a message to the entire country.

As you are well aware, China's influence abroad extends to the United Nations. The Chinese government works systematically to prevent Uyghur activists from using UN human rights mechanisms to report abuses and retaliation. For example, the government has branded the World Uyghur Congress, a leading advocacy group, as a terrorist group without any credible basis. China has tried to use its control of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs to keep Uyghur and other voices critical of Beijing out of the UN. You should continue to use your public voice on your "home turf" to counter the official Chinese narrative and ensure that Uyghur and other voices are not silenced at the UN.

On your past visits to China, you have played down the UN's human rights pillar. Continuing to do so will be a victory for a government that is profoundly hostile to human rights. In the interest of the many victims of the Chinese government's rights violations, we urge you to speak out publicly as well as privately with a direct appeal to President Xi to close Xinjiang's "political education" camps, permit free expression, association, and movement, and respect the human rights of all, at home and abroad. As always, we are happy to brief your team on our recommendations in further detail.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Bruno Stagno', written in a cursive style.

Bruno Stagno
Deputy Executive Director, Advocacy
Human Rights Watch