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March 29, 2019

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern  
Freepost Parliament  
Private Bag 18 888  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington 6160  
New Zealand

HUMAN  
RIGHTS  
WATCH

HRW.org

Re: Your upcoming visit to China

Dear Prime Minister Ardern,

We write on the occasion of your forthcoming trip to China. Since the Christchurch mosque killings on March 15, you have demonstrated extraordinary leadership with respect to the rights of Muslims and of religious freedom. Consequently, we urge you to privately and publicly press President Xi Jinping and other senior officials to accept an international fact-finding mission to Xinjiang, the region of China in which the fundamental human rights of 13 million Turkic Muslims are under sustained assault.

Human Rights Watch is an independent international organization that monitors human rights in more than 90 countries in the world. We have been reporting on and advocating solutions to human rights abuses in China for more than 30 years.

Chinese leaders have long construed the distinct culture, ethnicity, language, and religion of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims as evidence of separatism or terrorism. Over the past two decades, Human Rights Watch has documented widespread human rights violations across Xinjiang, including enforced disappearances, torture, persecution of peaceful government critics, and tight restrictions on travel.

Since the government launched the latest “Strike Hard” campaign in Xinjiang in 2016, credible estimates indicate that authorities have arbitrarily detained about one million Turkic Muslims in “political education” camps simply based on their identity and without any legal process. Outside the camps, authorities surveil and control every aspect of life in Xinjiang, imposing severe restrictions on the rights to freedom of religion, expression, association, and movement. The government’s efforts have not been limited to within China: we regularly document Chinese government harassment and surveillance of Uyghur diaspora communities worldwide.

The Chinese government strictly censors information related to Xinjiang and Muslims in China. Exposing human rights violations in Xinjiang, criticizing the government’s policies towards Muslim minorities, or providing accurate accounts of discrimination against Muslims prompt Chinese authorities to remove social media accounts, harass users, or arbitrarily detain them. At the same time, the government promotes views that associate Islam with violence, terrorism, and extremism. These contribute to anti-Muslim discrimination and to rampant virulent and derogatory attacks on Chinese social media against Muslim minorities, including recent ones applauding the Christchurch killings.

United Nations experts, treaty bodies, and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have expressed grave concerns about the human rights situation in Xinjiang and called for unrestricted access to the region. But China has not responded positively to these requests. In December and January, the government arranged visits for some journalists and diplomats to what they claim to be “vocational training centers.” Following those visits, Chinese state media asserted that visitors found the conditions there “impress[ive]” and detainees “in good spirits.” As a result, the High Commissioner, several governments, and nongovernmental organizations, including Human Rights Watch, have called for UN experts to have full access to Xinjiang to conduct an independent assessment of alleged wide patterns of violations, including enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions.

In recent years, successive New Zealand governments have been relatively reticent in challenging Chinese authorities over serious human rights violations, preferring to confine those discussions to bilateral human rights dialogues. For instance, in March 2016, a dozen governments put forward an unprecedented joint statement at the UN Human Rights Council condemning China’s human rights violations, and in November 2018, 15 Beijing-based diplomats sent a letter to Xinjiang Party Secretary Chen Quanguo seeking a discussion regarding human rights in Xinjiang.

New Zealand did not join either effort, nor did it address the issue in its national statements at the recent session of the Human Rights Council, despite significant attention to these grave human rights concerns by the High Commissioner and a broad range of other delegations.

New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials have stressed to us a strong preference for private diplomacy with China on human rights issues. Our experience suggests that such an approach is ineffective, allowing all parties to say that the issue has “been raised” while providing no information about specifics or demands. Even more problematic, it renders the discussion invisible to the most important agents of change: people across China.

New Zealand has just endured an appalling attack on Islam and its history as a tolerant nation; your principled, unequivocal, and evocative defense of Muslims and pluralistic societies is laudable. We urge you to call on China’s leaders to close the “political education” camps, end government-backed anti-Muslim statements, actions and policies, and inform the leadership of New Zealand’s support for urgent access to Xinjiang.

We look forward to discussing these issues at your convenience.

Ken Roth  
Executive Director

Sophie Richardson  
China Director

Cc: Winston Peters  
Ministry of Foreign Affairs