

UN Rights Chief Reports on Her Visit to China: What's Wrong with This Picture?

HRIC Statement

May 28, 2022

Michelle Bachelet, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, concludes her visit to China with a disappointing [statement](#) that betrays her mandate, as the world's highest human rights authority, to "promote and protect the enjoyment and full realization, by all people, of all human rights."

Bachelet made her visit against the backdrop of gross and deepening violations of fundamental rights—political, cultural, and religious—in China that have prompted sustained outcry and concern from governments, civil society groups, UN human rights mechanisms and independent experts. These violations have made news headlines around the world: the imprisonment of rights lawyers and advocates on the mainland, the allegation of a genocide in Xinjiang targeting Uyghurs and other ethnic Muslims, the criminalization of fundamental rights and systematic dismantlement of civil society in Hong Kong, and the continued repression of Tibetans.

Bachelet stresses that "This visit was not an investigation [but] an opportunity to hold direct discussions – with China's most senior leaders – on human rights, to listen to each other, raise concerns . . ." and states that she raised areas of concerns with Chinese officials and "encouraged" the Chinese government to ensure that its policies comply with international human rights standards. She continues, "I spoke to everyone I met in China – regional and national officials, civil society, academics, diplomats and others – with candour, with a sincere desire to make progress on the promotion and protection of human rights for all."

"Surely, in this time of human rights crisis in China, the High Commissioner's visit cannot just be a listening and sharing of concerns exercise," said Sharon Hom, Executive Director of Human Rights in China. "The urgent need for concrete measures to promote rights progress demands more than the 'outcomes' announced: the creation of yet more 'engagement' exercises that lack benchmarks, accountability, and inclusion of meaningful civil society participation. "

Deeply troubling is Bachelet's adoption of Chinese official terminology that evades and conceals the truth, e.g., "Vocational Education and Training Centres (VETCs)" to characterize the camps used for the mass incarceration of Uyghurs in Xinjiang—estimated to be at least one million—the reports of which have been backed by an extensive body of documented evidence and analyses. The High Commissioner's invocation of benign "training centers" and echoing of Beijing's claim of the imperative for counter-terrorism and "deradicalization" measures in Xinjiang, further aggravate her failure to release her Xinjiang report, which her [spokesperson](#) said was near completion in early December 2021. This apparent effort to avoid "sensitive" issues prior to the country visit resulted in a missed opportunity

for a frank and grounded discussion of concerns regarding the brutal campaign against the Uyghur people.

The two concrete visit outcomes announced by the High Commissioner—an “annual senior strategic meeting for discussion of issues” and the establishment of a “working group to facilitate substantive exchanges and cooperation” between her office and the Chinese government—are simply yet more high-level talk shops which are inadequate to address the crisis-level of the human rights situation.

Bachelet also states: “To those who have sent me appeals, asking me to raise issues or cases with the authorities - I have heard you. Your advocacy matters and my visit was an opportunity to raise a number of specific situations and issues of concern with the Government.”

But transparency and accountability require disclosures of what specific cases were raised (unless specifically requested by impacted individuals to not do so), and what follow-up steps will be taken to ensure concerns are addressed.

“We appreciate being heard. What we want is action,” said Hom.

Background on High Commissioner Bachelet’s China Visit

From May 23-28, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet made the first country visit to China of the mandate holder since 2005. Bachelet’s [visit](#), which was conducted at China’s invitation, included meetings with high-level officials, civil society organizations, and visits to Guangzhou, Kashgar and Urumqi.

Her visit coincided with the leak of a trove of [documents](#), which indisputably reveal the wide-scale atrocities against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang and directly link them to the highest echelons of the Communist Party of China leadership. The documents contain more than 5,000 police photos of Uyghurs taken within the span of a mere 6-months in 2018. Cross-checks with additional data show that 2,884 of those individuals have been detained. The documents also expose the day-to-day workings of prison sites, as well as their “shoot to kill” policy against those who attempt escape.

Prior to Bachelet’s visit, civil society groups around the world had expressed concerns that she was allowing her trip to become part of the Chinese government propaganda that trumpets international cooperation. Her office continues to delay the release of a report on Xinjiang which a spokesperson said in December 2021 would be [forthcoming](#) in several weeks’ time.