

TURKEY NEEDS TO RESPOND TO CHINA'S CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

The Chinese government's oppression of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples has reached unprecedented levels since late 2016. Human Rights Watch research demonstrates that the Chinese government has committed, and continues to commit, crimes against humanity, including mass arbitrary detention and pervasive restrictions on religious freedoms. The response—or lack, thereof—of Muslim majority countries and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to these crimes has been particularly disappointing. The Turkish government, for example, has not taken the lead many had hoped it would in advocating for the rights of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. But it is not too late. Turkey still has the chance to implement concrete policies to hold the Chinese government accountable for its human rights abuses against Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in Xinjiang.

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TPQ

Spring 2021

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The Chinese government’s oppression of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim peoples is not new, but it has reached unprecedented levels since late 2016. In addition to China’s mass arbitrary detention and pervasive restrictions on practicing Islam, there is increasing evidence of forced labor, broad surveillance, and unlawful separation of children from their families. Human Rights Watch research shows that the Chinese government has committed, and continues to commit, crimes against humanity, among the gravest human rights abuses under international law.

Some governments, notably the United States, but also the European Union, Canada, and the UK, have imposed targeted sanctions on officials and police agencies responsible for these abuses.¹ But the international community’s response is inadequate considering the gravity of these abuses.

The role of Muslim majority countries and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has been particularly disappointing. Not only have they failed to speak out about China’s abuses, but more than a dozen OIC member states signed a statement that whitewashes China’s policies in Xinjiang.² Some of these governments that have portrayed themselves as defenders of the rights of Muslims, including Saudi Arabia,³ have instead been helping the Chinese government to arrest and even forcibly return⁴ Uyghurs in their countries. But back in China, they are likely to face persecution, including torture and arbitrary detention.

These countries’ double standards are all the more remarkable given that the Chinese government considers Uyghurs’ links to 26 listed Muslim-majority countries—including Turkey—a common criterion for arbitrary detention.⁵ In one case, documented in a Chinese official record,⁶ four Uyghur family members were given prison sentences⁷ of 11 to 23 years for having travelled to Turkey in 2013 and 2014 to visit another relative. Chinese authorities claimed that the man in Turkey, a

¹ Emily Rauhala, “U.S., E.U., Canada and Britain announce sanctions on China over the abuse of Uyghurs,” *Washington Post*, 22 March 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/xinjiang-sanctions-european-union/2021/03/22/1b0d69aa-8b0a-11eb-a33e-da28941cb9ac_story.html

² Human Rights Watch, “China: Muslim-Majority States Whitewash Abuses,” 17 July 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/17/china-muslim-majority-states-whitewash-abuses>

³ Human Rights Watch, “Saudi Arabia: Clarify Status of Uyghur Detainees,” 23 November 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/23/saudi-arabia-clarify-status-uyghur-detainees>

⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Don’t Deport Uyghurs to China,” 7 July 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/07/08/egypt-dont-deport-uyghurs-china>

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “‘Eradicating Ideological Viruses’-China’s Campaign of Repression Against Xinjiang’s Muslims,” 9 September 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2018/09/09/eradicating-ideological-viruses/chinas-campaign-repression-against-xinjiangs>

⁶ Xinjiang Victims Database, <https://shahit.biz/verview.php?no=38>

⁷ “Siblings Get Lengthy Jail Terms in Xinjiang For Links to Turkey-Based Uyghur Scholar,” *Radio Free Asia*, 22 August 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/scholar-siblings-08222020092753.html>

university lecturer named Erkin Emet, belonged to a terrorist organization, and that the money (2,500 US dollars) and gifts his family gave him—including a dutar, a traditional musical instrument, a gold ring, and basic necessities—were evidence that they had been “assisting terrorism.”

The Chinese government’s policy, which effectively considers links to these countries as supporting terrorism, demonstrates blatant Islamophobia. It is the kind of spurious accusation that many of these governments would have unequivocally condemned had it come from a Western government.

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The Turkish government’s position on Xinjiang has been inconsistent. On the one hand, it called out⁸ Xinjiang’s abuses in two statements, in February 2019 and October 2020,⁹ and said it had raised the issue¹⁰ during the Chinese foreign minister’s visit to Turkey in March 2021. On the other hand, it sent back at least four Uyghurs—two women and two children—via Tajikistan to Xinjiang in 2018.¹¹ Turkish authorities claimed that one of the women was a Tajik national, which her sister denied. Turkey has also signed though not yet ratified an extradition agreement with China, which sends jitters through the Uyghur diaspora community—one of the biggest in the world—for fear that its adoption will increase the risk of Uyghurs being forcibly returned.¹²

The Turkish government has not taken the lead many had hoped it would in advocating for the rights of Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples. In view of the historic and widespread support for Uyghurs and Turkic peoples in Turkish society, the government’s ambiguous stance is disappointing. But it is not too late.

⁸ Philippe Boloipon, “Turkey Calls Out China’s Repression of Uyghurs,” *Human Rights Watch*, 14 February 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/02/14/turkey-calls-out-chinas-repression-uyghurs>

⁹ Anadolu Ajansı, “Turkey Takes On China At UNGA; Laments Human Rights Violations Of Uighur Muslim,” *Eurasian Times*, 7 October 2020, <https://eurasianimes.com/turkey-takes-on-china-laments-human-rights-violations-of-uighur-muslims/>

¹⁰ “Turkey raises Uighur issue with China as hundreds protest,” *Al Jazeera*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/25/turkey-says-conveyed-sensitivity-about-uighurs-to-china>

¹¹ “Uyghur Mother, Daughters Deported to China From Turkey,” *Radio Free Asia*, 9 September 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/deportation-08092019171834.html>

¹² Daren Butler, “Looming China extradition deal worries Uighurs in Turkey,” *Reuters*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east-africa/looming-china-extradition-deal-worries-uighurs-turkey-2021-03-08/>

Human Rights Watch has urged the United Nations Human Rights Council to create a commission of inquiry with authority to investigate alleged grave human rights violations, identify officials responsible for abuses, and provide a road map for holding them accountable. The UN high commissioner for human rights should also monitor and report on the human rights situation in Xinjiang and keep the Human Rights Council regularly informed. Turkey has the chance to play a strong role in facilitating and leading support for these steps, which would send a very clear signal to the Chinese government that such abuses will no longer be tolerated.

Turkey should also impose coordinated visa bans, travel bans, and targeted individual sanctions on authorities responsible for serious rights abuses in Xinjiang. The Turkish authorities should also consider how to pursue domestic criminal cases concerning the abuses in Xinjiang under the concept of “universal jurisdiction,” which allows prosecution of grave crimes committed abroad. And they should adopt trade restrictions and other measures to end the use of forced labor in China. Domestically, the Turkish government can do a lot more to protect the Uyghur and Turkic diaspora by ensuring that they have access to a fair system for adjudicating asylum requests, facilitate family reunification by allowing family members of Uyghurs to join them, and end all direct and indirect forced returns of Uyghurs to China. Turkey should also establish systems to track harassment of Uyghurs in Turkey and take steps, including through criminal law, to hold those responsible to account. Finally, it should ensure that Uyghurs have access to legal, medical, and psychological assistance for survivors of torture, rape, and other crimes, and to programs for cultural and religious preservation.

The Turkish government said two years ago that, “The reintroduction of internment camps in the twenty-first century and the policy of systematic assimilation against the Uighur Turks carried out by the authorities of China is a great shame for humanity.”¹³ The Turkish government needs to move forward with concrete policies to press the Chinese government for accountability and justice for Uyghurs and other Turkic peoples in Xinjiang.

¹³ “Statement of the Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Hami Aksoy, in response to a question regarding serious human rights violations perpetrated against Uighur Turks and the passing away of folk poet Abdurehim Heyit,” 9 February 2019, https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sc_-06_-uygur-turklerine-yonelik-agir-insan-haklari-ihlalleri-ve-abdurrehim-heyit-in-vefati-hk.en.mfa