

FEATURE

UN's Bachelet says China trip not for a probe, faces criticism

Rights bodies criticise the rights chief for failing to hold the Chinese government accountable for rights abuse against Uighur Muslims.

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/28/hr-organisations-slam-un-right-chief-over-china-visit>



UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet made the first visit by a UN high commissioner for human rights to China in 17 years [File: Denis Balibouse/Reuters]

The UN human rights chief has defended her [China trip](#) as she was accused of failing to hold Beijing accountable for its alleged human rights abuses, saying she raised concerns with officials about the treatment of Uighur Muslims in the country.

Michelle Bachelet said on Saturday her contentious six-day visit to China, including Xinjiang province, was “not an investigation” but insisted she spoke with “candour” during her official meetings. The US, which has accused China of committing “genocide” against Uighur

Muslims in western Xinjiang province, had termed Bachelet's trip "a mistake".

The top UN human rights official said the visit will pave the way for more regular interactions to support China in fulfilling its obligations under international human rights law.

"It provides an opportunity for me to better understand the situation in China, but also for the authorities in China to better understand our concerns and to potentially rethink policies that we believe may impact negatively on human rights," she said in a video news conference on the final day of her trip.

Bachelet said China must not use legitimate concerns about "terrorism" to justify human rights abuses.

It's uncertain whether China's governing Communist Party, which has vehemently denied all reports of [human rights violations and genocide in Xinjiang](#), would change its policies.

Anger among HR community

Sophie Richardson from Human Rights Watch said that Bachelet's visit seemed to be about "making nice with the Chinese government" rather than holding it accountable for some of the worst human rights violations it has committed under international law.

Speaking from Washington DC, Richardson said that Bachelet's suggestion that she was unable to assess the scale of the human rights violations came across as "an ingenious way of ignoring a tidal wave of evidence" that shows how the Chinese government has targeted Uighurs and other Muslim minorities.

She urged Bachelet to urgently publish a report prepared by the UN rights office on the crimes committed by the Chinese government against humanity, Uighurs, and other Muslim communities.

"She needs to commit to a real investigation with the intention to hold those responsible accountable," said Richardson.

"Otherwise, this will have been a propaganda exercise that the Chinese government will revel in."

Reporting from Beijing, Al Jazeera's Katrina Yu said Bachelet gave a "very measured statement", where she "started out by talking about the achievements of the Chinese government before she even mentioned Xinjiang".

"She was at pains to emphasise that this was not an investigation and that she simply did not have time in one single trip to investigate the scale of human rights concerns in China," Yu said.

She added that Bachelet's main achievement was to engage with the Chinese government in hope that this will help raise concerns about some of their policies.

"It is likely that human rights organisation will be very disappointed. It seemed from her remarks that the visit hadn't achieved anything beyond bringing the Chinese government's attention to concerns of human rights abuses," said Yu.

"Human rights groups were hoping this would be an opportunity for a high profile individual to make some sort of assessment or achieve something when it came to changing the situation," she added.

Raising concerns

Bachelet, making the first visit by a UN high commissioner for human rights to China in 17 years, said she raised the lack of independent judicial oversight for the system of internment camps, according to estimates by experts.

China, which has described the camps as vocational training and education centres to combat "extremism", said they have been closed. The government has never publicly said how many people passed through them.

UN's Bachelet also held a video call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, who [defended his](#)

[government's record](#). Xi told Bachelet that China's development of human rights "suits its own national conditions".

[A data leak released on Tuesday](#) revealed the extent of Muslim repression in Xinjiang where at least one million Uighurs and other Muslim minorities have been detained inside a network of internment camps and prisons.

Bachelet, who visited a prison and former centre in the Xinjiang city of Kashgar, noted that the programme relied on police to determine "tendencies toward extremism" and the allegations of use of force at the centres and unduly severe restrictions on religious practice.

"It is critical that counter-terrorism responses do not result in human rights violations," she said. "The application of relevant laws and policies and any mandatory measures ... need to be subject to independent judicial oversight with greater transparency in judicial proceedings."

Before her trip, she said she heard from Uighur families living abroad that have lost contact with their loved ones. In her meetings in China, she said she raised a number of specific cases and appealed to authorities to take steps to provide information to families as a matter of priority.

"To those who have sent me appeals asking me to raise issues or cases with the authorities, I heard you," she said. "Your advocacy matters."

Bachelet described as "deeply worrying" the arrest of lawyers, activists, journalists and others under Hong Kong's national security law, noting the semi-autonomous Chinese city's reputation as a centre for human rights and independent media in Asia.

She also spoke on the importance of protecting the linguistic, religious and cultural

identity of Tibetans and that they be allowed to participate fully and freely in decisions about their religious life.

The UN and China agreed to set up a working group to hold follow-up discussions on a range of issues, including the rights of minorities, counterterrorism and human rights, and legal protection, Bachelet said.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA AND NEWS AGENCIES

Editor's Note:

UN human rights chief to forgo second term amid China trip criticism

Michelle Bachelet, strongly criticised over Xinjiang visit, cites personal reasons for decision

Excerpted from:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/13/un-human-rights-chief-michelle-bachelet-no-second-term-china>



[Vincent Ni](#) China affairs correspondent
Mon 13 Jun 2022 11.18 EDT

Michelle Bachelet addresses a press conference after saying she will not seek a second term. Photograph: Valentin Flauraud/EPA

The United Nations' human rights chief has announced her decision to step down, citing "personal reasons", amid weeks of speculation following her recent China trip that drew [fierce criticism from activists and western politicians](#).

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