



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

In the spotlight again: China and Tibet at UN Human Rights Council

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At the 50th session of the UN Human Rights Council currently underway in Geneva (June 13-July 8), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet's May visit to China—and the subsequent NGO and diplomatic criticism—has featured prominently, as have the high commissioner's future plans with her first term ending in August.

During the session, the International Campaign for Tibet's UN Advocacy Team have, on behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, delivered three statements on Tibet. The statements were delivered on the issues of education, climate change, and freedom of opinion and expression.

International response to high commissioner's China visit

On June 10, 2022, shortly before the start of 50th session of the Human Rights Council, 42 UN human rights mandate holders published a joint statement reiterating a June 2020 call for a special mechanism to investigate and report on the human rights situation in China. While acknowledging the High Commissioner's recent country visit to China, the joint statement stressed that high-level engagement does not replace the “urgent need for a complete assessment of the human rights situation in the country, and especially in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the Tibet Autonomous region and in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region,” particularly given the absence of “any signs of political will [by China] to address the concerns raised.” It should be noted that the “Tibet Autonomous Region” excludes Tibetan areas in the provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan and does not represent the entire Tibet.

In her regular oral update on global human rights developments and the activities of her office, High Commissioner Bachelet noted that she engaged in dialogue with the most senior leaders and officials at the national level during her visit to China, and key representatives from Guangdong and Xinjiang. Bachelet noted that she raised specific human rights concerns relating to Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong and discussed follow up actions, including the creation of an annual senior meeting on human rights.

In response to her statement on China, 11 countries¹ and the European Union raised their concerns about the human rights situation in China. Four countries² and the European Union expressed concern for the human rights situation in Tibet, and nine countries³ and the European Union called for the prompt release of the high commissioner's office report on the human rights situation in Xinjiang. In addition to these country statements, the Netherlands delivered a joint statement on behalf of 47 countries⁴ expressing grave concern about the

¹ Australia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

² Czech Republic, Denmark, Germany, and Norway.

³ Australia, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Iceland, Sweden, Turkey, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

⁴ Albania, Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Belize, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Eswatini, Finland, France, Germany, Guatemala, Honduras, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Liberia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Marshall Islands, Monaco, Montenegro, Netherlands, New Zealand,

human rights situation in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong. The joint statement also expressed interest in the restrictions placed on the high commissioner's visit to China and called on her to provide a timeline for the release of her office's previously announced report on Xinjiang. It is notable that a statement on China had garnered less state support when in October 2021, 43 states supported a cross-regional statement on Xinjiang. Tibet and Hong Kong, interestingly, were not mentioned in the 2021 statement.

A countering joint statement delivered by Cuba on behalf of 69 countries argued Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet are China's internal affairs and should not be interfered with.

At the close of her remarks, High Commissioner Bachelet indicated that her office's report on Xinjiang will be shared with the government for factual comments before publication, and that it would be released before the end of her term.

High Commissioner Bachelet not seeking second term paves way for someone with integrity

During the first day of the 50th session, High Commissioner Bachelet also announced that she would not be seeking a second term as UN high commissioner. Bachelet cited personal reasons for the decision and a desire to return to her family and her home country of Chile.

The high commissioner has been dangerously silent on Tibet throughout her term and has also legitimated propaganda used by China to justify the inhumane persecution of Tibetans and Uyghurs. Therefore, her not seeking another term is to be welcomed, as it paves the way for someone of high moral standing and personal integrity and who is independent and impartial, and possesses competency and expertise in the field of human rights. ICT endorses the call by NGOs for a transparent, merit-based and consultative process to pick the next UN high commissioner for human rights.

Statements delivered at the Human Rights Council: boarding schools, climate change and freedom of expression

Right to Education

ICT, on behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, delivered three statements. During the Interactive Dialogue with the special rapporteur on the right to education, our oral statement highlighted Chinese President Xi Jinping's expansion of a harmful boarding school system that separates Tibetan children from their families and enforces Chinese-language education.

The statement lamented that Tibetan parents now fear "their language, culture, religion and identity will be erased in one generation." It added, "China's boarding school policy is discriminatory and violates multiple international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as China's own domestic laws," and called on UN member states to urge China to halt the policy.

It is notable that eight NGOs apparently affiliated with the Chinese government (also known as GONGOs) were registered to participate in the debate with the special rapporteur on the right to education, although none of them delivered an intervention in the end. Following the discussion, the Chinese Mission exercised their right of reply to address statements delivered on behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and, in addition, to the Society for Threatened Peoples. In its reply, the Chinese Mission reassured the Council that "Tibetan language is taught all over Tibet," boarding schools are welcomed by students and parents, and NGOs have engaged in "anti-China separatist activities" and "do not care about human rights."

North Macedonia, Norway, Palau, Poland, Portugal, Romania, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, United States of America.

Human rights and climate change

In the interactive dialogue with the new special rapporteur on human rights and climate change, the oral statement delivered denounced the international blind spot on Tibet's environment and climate change in Tibet. The statement highlighted "Tibetans are a vulnerable community disproportionately affected by climate change, with temperatures in the Earth's third largest ice source rising 2-4 times faster than the rest of the world. Despite this reality, Tibetans are doubly silenced in their efforts to respond to climate and environmental change. First, Tibetans are not empowered with basic rights to challenge injustice, freely express their opinion or culture to maintain their sustainable relationship with land. Second, when Tibetans raise environmental concerns, their causes are incorrectly dismissed as separatist activism."

The intervention closed by urging "the international community to pay attention to climate change in the Earth's third pole, and press China to uphold a human-rights based approach to climate change."

The Chinese Mission also indirectly responded to the statement on human rights and climate change, arguing that the term human rights defenders (including environmental defenders) lacks an internationally agreed definition.

Freedom of opinion and expression

Finally, in the interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression, the oral statement delivered on behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights emphasized that ordinary Tibetan citizens "remain isolated from the international community, and are unable to engage with free and independent media, let alone private conversations."

The statement cited the sentencing of Tibetan monk Go Sherab Gyatso and called on states and the Human Rights Council to support the recent call by 42 independent UN human rights experts for a special mechanism to monitor the human rights situation in China.



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