

OHCHR Xinjiang report: a propaganda set-piece with more holes than substance

13 Sept.—The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights' 31 August report on China's Xinjiang region is being held up by Western governments, media, and human rights NGOs as vindication of their claims that the Chinese government has committed systematic and large-scale human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention in a network of purpose-built internment centres, against the Uyghur¹ people and other minority ethnic groups who live there. It is not. In fact the "OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region [XUAR], People's Republic of China", as the report is formally titled, in large part merely recycles those very same allegations, despite most of them having long since been debunked and their proponents thoroughly discredited. Even so, not only does the Assessment conspicuously fail to back up the Western human rights mafia's longstanding allegations of "genocide", but it does not even assert unequivocally that the Chinese government has committed any crimes against humanity in Xinjiang at all, stating only in a deliberately vague manner that undefined crimes "may" have occurred. And in order to reach even that weak conclusion, it omits countervailing opinions from other UN experts and international envoys who have visited Xinjiang, including diplomats from dozens of Muslim-majority nations; incorporates no input from any local organisation representing the supposedly persecuted communities, with whom then-High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet and her staff met during their visit in May; and deliberately misrepresents Chinese laws, law enforcement procedures and government policy statements to make them seem far more draconian than they actually are. Meanwhile, it downplays almost to the point of outright dismissal the decade-long spate of terrorist attacks by separatists and religious extremists that killed hundreds of people—many of them Uyghurs—and prompted the central government to launch its counterterrorism, deradicalisation and crash vocational training and poverty-reduction programs in Xinjiang in the first place.

This blatant one-sidedness combined with doubts over the report's authorship, the timing of its release after Bachelet's term as High Commissioner had formally ended, and its inconsistency both with previous OHCHR reports (in both content and methodology) and with Bachelet's previous public comments on the matter, all cast the Assessment as yet another example of an ostensibly impartial international body succumbing to political pressure from Anglo-American-led Western powers trying desperately to hold on to their fading geopolitical supremacy by enforcing their "international rulesbased order" over and above international law.

Who wrote the 'Bachelet report'?

High Commissioner Bachelet, a former president of Chile, visited China in the latter half of May this year. In addition to whatever staff may have accompanied her, she was preceded (by two weeks) by an advance team of five specialists from her office. In a 28 May press conference at the conclusion of her tour, Bachelet stated that she had met with "a range of officials" from both national and regional governments, including from Xinjiang, "[and] was able to interact with civil society organisations, academics, and community and religious leaders and others inside and outside the country. In advance of my visit, my Office and I met virtually with a number of civil society organisations that are working on issues relating to Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong and other parts of China. ... I was also able to engage with representatives of China's business community, and am encouraged to see Chinese companies and sectors embracing human rights standards for their operations and supply chains." Bachelet did not say when the written Assessment would be released, but normally such reports are issued within weeks, subject only to basic fact-checking by the host government per standard UN operational procedure.

Instead the release was dragged out until 31 August, Bachelet's final day in office. Not only that, but the report appears only to have been published on the OHCHR's website at 12:20 AM on 1 September in Geneva, Switzerland (where the Office is actually located), or after 6:00 PM 31 August (and thus outside normal business hours) in New York, USA, where the UN itself is headquartered. Either way, it was therefore released only after Bachelet had officially left office. Nor, despite media constantly referring to it as the "Bachelet report", was the assessment issued in her name—or anyone's. In contrast to other OHCHR reports, it contains no reference to, much less a foreword by the High Commissioner herself. The OHCHR at times also issues reports at the behest of the UN Human Rights Council, but neither it nor any other institution are named as the commissioning party in this case. Nor are the authors' names or positions within the OHCHR disclosed.

Biased source selection

As noted above, in her May press conference Bachelet stated that she and/or her team had met with "civil society organisations, academics, and community and religious leaders and others" in Xinjiang. None of their input is incorporated or even acknowledged in the Assessment. Instead it is based mainly upon long-since-debunked anti-China screeds by propagandists in the employ of the US and allied governments. These include the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's (ASPI) "Xinjiang Data Project", a website launched in September 2020 which was funded by the US State Department. In the specific report to which the Assessment refers (though not by name), titled "Documenting Xinjiang's

detention system”, ASPI analyst Nathan Ruser claimed to have identified and mapped over 380 detention facilities in the region via analysis of satellite images. Many of the buildings, however—which Ruser had identified by their “combination of walls, watchtowers [*sic*] and barbed-wire fencing”—turned out to be easily identifiable via public sources (including Google Maps’ “street view” function) as schools, hospitals, shopping centres, factories, government offices, and housing complexes.²

The Assessment also relies heavily Adrian Zenz of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation (VCMF), one of two apparent originators (in 2018) of the claim that China had arbitrarily imprisoned “up to one million” Uyghurs in “detention centres” across Xinjiang—a claim which he later admitted was based upon estimates extrapolated from hearsay which he had no evidence to support, and which was rejected by diplomats from dozens of Muslim countries after they visited Xinjiang in 2019. A German national, Zenz is a fundamentalist Evangelical Christian fanatic who has publicly declared himself “led by God” on a “mission” to destroy the Communist Party of China (CPC). His employer VCMF is a US government-funded pseudo-NGO based in Washington, DC, whose ideological bias is obvious from its name alone, let alone the tenor of its “research” output.

In addition to Zenz’s own reports, the Assessment also cites various caches of supposedly leaked Chinese government documents which Zenz (who has repeatedly proven himself an incompetent translator) claimed to have “authenticated” before they were publicised by mainstream media outlets including London’s *Financial Times*, the *New York Times*, and US state-owned multimedia broadcasters Voice of America and Radio Free Asia (RFA)—the latter an official propaganda organ of the US State Department, which is chartered to tailor its broadcasts to advance Washington’s foreign policy objectives. Moreover, in each case the alleged government documents had been supplied to Zenz and/or the media not by anyone in Xinjiang, but by various exiled Uyghur separatist individuals and organisations, mostly via the US-based Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP). The UHRP was founded in 2004 by the Washington, DC-based Uyghur American Association, and is funded by the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation established by the US government in 1983 to fund subversion, *coups d’états* and general dirty tricks in countries targeted for destabilisation and “regime change”.

The Assessment admits however that the OHCHR cannot vouch that any of these documents is genuine, stating only that “OHCHR was able to take steps to verify their authenticity, resulting in assessment that they are highly likely to be authentic and therefore could be credibly relied upon in support of other information”, while “For others, such verification was not possible”.

Regarding the “other information”, the Assessment explains that “OHCHR also conducted, in accordance with its standard practice and methodology, 40 in-depth interviews with individuals with direct and first-hand knowledge of the situation in XUAR.... Twenty-six of the interviewees stated they had been either detained or had worked in *various facilities* across XUAR since 2016. ... Over one third of the 40 interviewees had either not been interviewed by others, or had been interviewed in the past by researchers, civil society or journalists, but opted not to publicly share their experience prior to speaking to OHCHR. ... Interviewees often used the term ‘camps’ to describe the facilities. While OHCHR is confident that most of these facilities as described by interviewees were in fact VETCs [Vocational Education and Training Centres], *it is possible that some were in fact pre-trial detention facilities*. Individuals interviewed by OHCHR were held in VETC facilities in at least eight different geographic locations spread across XUAR.” (Emphases added.) Which is to say that by their own account, 14 of the interviewees had never set foot inside any “facility”; it is unclear how many (perhaps all) of these interviews comprise what the Assessment goes on to describe as “first-hand accounts gathered by OHCHR from overseas family members of Uyghurs and Kazakhs who are serving lengthy custodial sentences for alleged terrorism and ‘extremism’ related offences”. In any case, of the 26 who did claim to have been sent to or worked in said “facilities”, an unspecified number had been interviewed before but changed or embellished their story when speaking to the UN.

Whitewashing terrorism

Perhaps the most repugnant aspect of the Assessment, though, is how it deliberately downplays the terrorism visited first upon Xinjiang, then throughout China, by religious and separatist extremist groups led by al-Qaeda ally the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), which both the NED and US Central Intelligence Agency have effectively admitted supporting at various times since the 1990s, and whose ideology is shared by the Uyghur exile NGOs the NED sponsors to this day. The first attack the OHCHR acknowledges is the 2009 “riots” in Xinjiang’s capital Urumqi, which killed some 200 people (almost half of them non-extremist Uyghurs). It notes the Chinese government’s report that “from 1990 to the end of 2016 [that is, until the advent of the counterterrorism and VETC program beginning 2017], separatist, terrorist and extremist forces launched thousands of terrorist attacks in Xinjiang, killing large numbers of innocent people and hundreds of police officers”, but downplays the severity of the problem first by describing similar ETIM attacks across the rest of China as “violent incidents ... [which the government] has consistently described as terrorist in nature”—as though there were any other description for avowed extremists ramming vehicles into crowds of people and hacking commuters to death with swords and hatchets at railway stations. And to imply that the government is exaggerating the extremist problem to give itself an excuse to detain large numbers of Uyghurs and other Muslims arbitrarily, the Assessment misrepresents a list of behaviours that

includes “conduct that falls within the exercise of fundamental [religious and cultural] freedoms”, such as men growing an abnormally large beard, suddenly quitting drinking and smoking, and refusing any longer to associate with others who drink and smoke, as “prohibited” and liable to get a person arrested and thrown into a “facility”—only to admit several paragraphs later that it is in fact a mere list of indicators for officials to look out for, the coincidence of several of which indicate that a person *may be at risk* of falling into an extremist interpretation of Islam, and warrants further investigation.

As attorney and independent researcher Casey Ho-yuk Wan wrote 9 September in an analysis for the Friends of Socialist China blog, the character of the Assessment “raises serious doubts as to the impartiality, objectivity, and non-selectivity of the OHCHR’s work with implications for the credibility not merely of the Assessment, but of the OHCHR as a responsible international organ capable of conducting human rights work in a constructive manner while avoiding double standards and politicisation”, as it is required to do by UN General Assembly Resolution 41/128 which established the office in 1994. Wan notes further that the collective West’s high-handedness has already not gone over well with the world at large, particularly developing nations—and especially Muslim ones. During the 50th session of the UN Human Rights Council in June-July this year, when the USA and 46 other countries voted to condemn the human rights situation in China, “more countries in each region of the world co-sponsored the statement supporting China than the one condemning (Africa 33-2, Americas 9-5, Asia 20-2), except for Europe and Oceania (3-34 and 4-4 respectively)”, Wan wrote. “Members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, ‘the collective voice of the Muslim world’) overwhelmingly co-sponsored the statement supporting China’s position (37-1).” The blatant bias of the OHCHR’s Xinjiang Assessment will only accelerate the divide.

Footnotes:

[1.](#) Also spelled “Uyghur”, “Uighur”.

[2.](#) “ASPI doubles down on Xinjiang ‘detention centre’ fakery”, AAS, 30 Sept. 2020.

By Richard Bardon and Melissa Harrison, Australian Alert Service, 14 September 2022