

Ms. Michelle Bachelet
High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Office of the United Nations
Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland

Paris, 27th April 2022

Dear Madam Commissioner,

Ahead of your mission to China in May 2022, please find enclosed a note on the situation of press freedom in the country, based on the findings from RSF's reports *The Great Leap Backwards of Journalism in China* (2021) and *China's Pursuit of a New World Media Order* (2019).

In recent years, President Xi Jinping has imposed a social model in China based on control of news and information, and the online surveillance of its citizens. The People's Republic of China ranks at the bottom of RSF's 2021 World Press Freedom Index at 177th out of 180 countries and more than 124 professional and non-professional journalists are currently detained, many in conditions that pose a threat to their lives.

The situation of journalism is particularly grave in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where the restrictions on media coverage have led to an information blackout. More than half of the journalists currently imprisoned in China are from this region and the few foreign journalists who are still allowed to visit the region are placed under close surveillance.

Beyond its borders, the Beijing regime goes to great lengths to promote this repressive model and to establish a "new world media order" in which journalists are nothing more than state propaganda auxiliaries, which poses a major threat to the world's democracies.

Further details and analysis can be found in the reports, also enclosed.

We respectfully ask you, Madam High Commissioner, to take all necessary measures to deter the Chinese authorities from continuing their campaign against journalism and freedom of information, and to secure the release of all detained journalists and press freedom defenders.

We remain at your disposal should you require any additional information.

Sincerely,

Christophe Deloire
Secretary General



Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Information note on the situation of press freedom in China (including in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region)

April 2022

The People's Republic of China still ranks at the bottom of Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) 2021 World Press Freedom Index (177th out of 180 countries). In recent years, President Xi Jinping has succeeded in imposing a social model in China based on the control of news and information and the online surveillance of its citizens. More than 124 professional and non-professional journalists are currently detained in conditions that pose a threat to their lives. Beyond its borders, Beijing seeks to promote this repressive model and to establish a "new world media order" under its influence.

I. CHINA'S ASSAULT ON PRESS FREEDOM

1 - Media under party control

1.1. The "Great Firewall" of censorship and surveillance

President Xi Jinping, in power since 2013, has succeeded in imposing a social model in China based on the control of news and information and the online surveillance of its citizens, restoring, in just a few years, a media culture comparable to the Maoist era. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), an institution personally supervised by Xi Jinping, has deployed a wide range of measures aimed at controlling the information accessible for China's 1.3 billion netizens. With the massive use of new technology and an army of censors and trolls, the regime manages to control and monitor the circulation of information, surveil and censor citizens online, and spread state propaganda on the Internet

1.2. Both state and privately-owned media are under the close supervision of the party

The Chinese Communist Party Publicity Department (CCPPD) implements propaganda guidelines adopted by the Central Committee's Leading Group for Propaganda and Ideology Work. Since 2018, it has direct authority on press and publication activities. Every week it summons media editors to a meeting and every day it gives them a list of stories they should highlight and a list they should ignore, at the risk of sanctions.

1.3. Hong Kong, press freedom in free fall

With the National Security Law in force since June 2020, journalists in Hong Kong - a former bastion of press freedom - are now threatened with sentences of life imprisonment if they are accused of "terrorist activities", "secession", "subversion", or "collusion with a foreign country", and could even face the death penalty if the case is tried in China. This legislation represents the most significant erosion to date of Hong Kong's British-style rule of law and the high degree of autonomy promised under the "one country, two systems" principle. To this date at least two dozen journalists have been arrested under this law, and 13 journalists and press freedom defenders are currently in detention awaiting their trials.

2 - Large scale abuses against journalists

2.1. China is the world's biggest captor of journalists

Since President Xi Jinping came into power, a wave of arrests unprecedented since the end of the Maoist era has hit journalists and political commentators across the country, abruptly ending a decade of experimentation with pluralism and debate in Chinese media. Currently, more than 124 journalists and non-professional journalists are detained in China in conditions that pose a threat to their lives.

2.2. Mistreatment in Chinese prisons

These are notoriously unsanitary and managed without any transparency, allow all kinds of abuse, and inside, detained journalists are almost systematically subjected to mistreatment and denial of medical care. **Liu Xiaobo**, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and winner of the RSF Press Freedom Prize, and **Yang Tongyan**, a dissident blogger, both died in 2017 from cancers that were left untreated while they were detained. In 2021, **Kunchok Jinpa**, a key news source on Tibet for foreign media, died of ill-treatment suffered whilst in detention.

2.3. Emblematic cases

- **Huang Qi**. Investigative journalist and 2004 RSF Press Freedom Award laureate and founder of the human rights news website 64 Tianwang, who was arrested in 2016 and sentenced in July 2019 by the Mianyang Intermediate People's Court (Sichuan province) to 12 years in prison for investigating human rights violations committed by Chinese officials.
- **Zhang Zhan**. Chinese journalist and 2021 RSF Press Freedom laureate who covered the first weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, and was sentenced to four years in prison for 'picking quarrels and provoking trouble' by the Shanghai Pudong New Area Court in December 2020.
- **Chen Jieren**. Former Chinese state media employee who was sentenced in 2020 to 15 years in prison by the Guiyang People's Court (Hunan province) for revealing facts of corruption implicating a number of Communist Party officials.
- **Jiang Yefei**. Cartoonist, known for his satirical cartoons, who was sentenced in 2018 to six and a half years in prison.

- **Qin Yongmin.** Journalist and defender of press freedom sentenced in 2018 to 13 years in prison for “subversion”.
- **Wu Gan.** Chinese political commentator, who wrote a satirical piece on the corruption of Communist Party officials and was sentenced to eight years in prison on a charge of ‘subverting state power’ in December 2017, after 952 days in preventive detention. He is a victim of torture, ill-treatment, and forced sleep deprivation.
- **Huang Xueqin.** Independent journalist and women’s rights activist arrested in September 2021 in the southern city of Guangzhou together with labour activist Wang Jianbing under suspicion of ‘inciting subversion of state power’.
- **Gui Minhai.** Chinese-born Swedish founder of a Hong Kong publishing house known for its investigations on Chinese leaders, abducted in Thailand in 2015 and reappeared on Chinese state TV for a confession months later. In February 2020, Gui was sentenced to ten years in prison under the charge of ‘illegally providing intelligence to foreign countries’, despite serious health concerns.
- **Yang Hengjun.** An Australian political commentator, arrested in January 2019 in the southeastern Chinese city of Guangzhou, charged with “espionage” and tortured while in detention. Yang’s trial was held in May 2021, but no verdict has yet been published.
- **Cheng Lei.** A high-profile Australian business news anchor working for state media group China Global Television (CGTN), arrested under suspicion of ‘illegally supplying state secrets overseas’ in August 2021. Lei was tried in March, 2022 but no sentence has yet been published.

3 - China’s New World Media Order

3.1 China exports its oppressive media model

Xi Jinping is trying to export the oppressive media model by promoting a “new world media order” under China’s influence. The regime is expanding its influence beyond its borders to impose its narrative on international audiences, and promoting a perverse concept where journalism equates to state propaganda.

3.2 Belt and Road Initiative used to influence foreign journalists

Across its Belt and Road initiative, which links China with more than 100 countries, China has established media networks such as the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN), the Belt and Road Media Community, and the Belt and Road News Alliance (BRNA). These are chaired by Chinese state media with the intention of conveying the Chinese regime’s propaganda and disseminating its working methods internationally to foreign journalists via training sessions organised by the BRNA and BRNN media networks.

3.3 Spreading the Chinese regime’s narrative around the world

Over the last decade, China has invested massively in developing media capable of reaching an international audience, and now state-owned CGTN broadcasts TV programmes in more than 160 countries and China Radio International broadcasts in 44 languages. Meanwhile, Beijing has invested

substantially in acquiring shares in European media and in the publication of editorial supplements in major international newspapers, which Beijing uses to spread propaganda and to exert financial pressure on foreign publications.

II. REPRESSION CAMPAIGN AGAINST JOURNALISTS IN XINJIANG

1.1. More than half of all journalists currently imprisoned in China are from Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Since launching a repression campaign in 2014 in Xinjiang, officially “against terrorism”, authorities have arrested several hundred Uyghur intellectuals, including many journalists. In March 2022, RSF counted 72 detained professional and non-professional Uyghur journalists, more than half of the 124 total who are currently detained in China. In recent years, the restrictions on media coverage of Xinjiang have led to an information blackout in the region, and as a result independent reporting has been mostly provided by media outlets based outside of the region. The few foreign journalists still allowed to visit Xinjiang are placed under close surveillance, cannot travel and interview freely, and, if their reporting displeases Beijing, risk seeing their names in bold on the blacklist of journalists banned from entering Chinese territory. In August 2018, **Megha Rajagopalan**, China bureau chief of *Buzzfeed News*, was forced to leave the country after the non-renewal of her visa. The previous year, she had published a report describing Xinjiang as a “frontline laboratory for surveillance”.

1.2. The Chinese regime is also targeting Xinjiang's journalists outside of its borders

Yidiresi Aishan, also known as Idris Hasan, a Chinese national born in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region and co-founder of *Shebnem*, a publication intended to help Uyghurs integrate into Turkish society, is facing extradition to China from Morocco despite the cancellation by Interpol on 2nd August 2021 of the “red notice” under which he was originally arrested.

1.3. Emblematic cases

- **Ilham Tohti**. Uyghur journalist, scholar and founder of information website *Uyghur Online*, laureate of the Council of Europe’s Václav Havel Prize and the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize, is serving a life sentence for “separatism” since 2014 for criticising the government. He has been kept in a detention facility in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, despite having a heart condition and lung problems.
- **Gulmira Imin**. Former administrator of the Uyghur language information website *Salkin*, was sentenced to life in prison in 2010 for “separatism” and “disclosing state secrets” because she criticised the government. Her sentence was reportedly reduced to 19 years and 8 months in prison after she signed a written statement of remorse in 2017. She is currently detained in Xinjiang Women’s Prison (Xinjiang No. 2 Prison) located in Urumqi, and was reportedly tortured while in detention.
- **Niyaz Kahar**. A journalist who disappeared during ethnic rioting in Urumqi in July 2009. His family confirmed in February 2014 that he had been convicted of publishing illegal news and propagating ideas of ethnic separatism on his website *Golden Tarim*, and was being held in

Shikho prison in the far north of Xinjiang. According to his relatives, his health has significantly deteriorated.

- **Erkin Tursun.** A Uyghur TV producer who has been detained since 2018, is now serving a 20-year prison sentence in Xinjiang on charges of “inciting ethnic hatred, ethnic discrimination and covering up crimes”. In April 2021, he appeared in a video on Chinese state TV delivering a forced confession.
- **Qurban Mamut.** The former editor-in-chief of the popular Uyghur journal Xinjiang Civilization, who went missing in November 2017. In 2020, he was confirmed to have been sentenced to 15 years in prison for “political crimes”. He is being kept in an unknown location in northwest Xinjiang.
- **Xinjiang Daily journalists.** In 2018, Xinjiang police arrested **Ilham Weli**, *Xinjiang Daily’s* deputy editor-in-chief, **Mentimin Obul** and **Juret Haji**, directors at the newspaper, and **Mirkamil Ablimit**, the head of the newspaper’s subsidiary *Xinjiang Farmer’s Daily*, on the accusation of publishing “two-faced” articles in the Uyghur language section of the newspaper, and they are now likely to be detained in Urumqi.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

RSF recommends the following actions in response to the situation in China and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR):

- Demand the release of all professional and non-professional journalists detained in connection with their reporting, and stop abducting, arresting, detaining, torturing, mistreating, searching, and harassing journalists and press freedom defenders for freely reporting news and information, in compliance with the constitution of the People’s Republic of China, which prohibits “unlawful detention,” guarantees “personal dignity”, and declares the homes of citizens to be “inviolable” (Articles 37, 38 and 39).
- Demand the Chinese regime to start respecting press freedom and the right to information both domestically and internationally.
- Demand the Chinese authorities to stop harassing journalists, media outlets, academics based abroad, and publishers in China, including in Xinjiang.
- Demand the Chinese authorities to end the system of online censorship and surveillance of journalists, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the right of Chinese citizens to the freedom and privacy of correspondence guaranteed by Article 40 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of China.
- Demand the Chinese authorities to stop impeding the work of foreign reporters in China and provide them with accreditation in an open and transparent manner.
- Release without further delay the report on grave ongoing human rights violations by Chinese authorities targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic communities in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, and brief members and observers of the UN Human Rights Council on its contents as a matter of urgency.

IV. INFORMATION ON THE SOURCE OF THE COMMUNICATION

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

CS 90247 75083 Paris Cedex 02

(0033) (0) 1 44 83 84 84

- **Antoine Bernard**, Director, Advocacy and Strategic Litigation - abernard@rsf.org
- **Cedric Alviani**, East Asia Bureau Head - calviani@rsf.org
- **Paul Pouchoux**, Advocacy Officer - ppouchoux@rsf.org
- **Aleksandra Bielakowska**, Senior Researcher - taipei7@rsf.org