

Chinese politics & policy

UN envoy 'unable to assess' scale of Xinjiang repression

Michelle Bachelet's Uyghur human rights investigation has been stymied by Beijing and expediency



Michelle Bachelet meets the Chinese president by video link. The commissioner was presented with a copy of 'Excerpts from Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights' © Yue Yuewei/Xinhua/AP

Edward White in Seoul and Lucinda Elliott in Buenos Aires 5 HOURS AGO

Michelle Bachelet, the UN human rights chief, said she had been “unable to assess the full scale” of the notorious system of so-called education and training centres in Xinjiang, undermining her landmark investigation of China’s crimes against Uyghur Muslims.

The former Chilean president spent two days in the north-western Chinese region where 1mn Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities have been subjected to mass internments, forced labour and re-education camps, as well as draconian tech-based surveillance and police persecution.

In Ürümqi, the capital, and Kashgar, another major city, Bachelet met senior Communist party and security officials and visited a prison and a former “vocational education and training centre”, among other facilities. Beijing has for years insisted that the VETC system was necessary as part of its response to terrorism and poverty in the region.

“The government assured me that the VETC system has been dismantled,” she told reporters in Guangzhou.

She added: “While I am unable to assess the full scale of the VETCs, I raised with the government the lack of independent judicial oversight of the operation of the

programme . . . allegations of the use of force and ill treatment in institutions, and reports of unduly severe restrictions on legitimate religious practices.”

Bachelet also appealed to Chinese authorities to provide information to Uyghurs who have lost contact with family members and review the state’s “counter terrorism and deradicalisation policies”.

The 70-year-old has been long considered a contender to be the first woman head of the UN. Her trip to China marks the first time a UN human rights commissioner has had access to China since 2005. It comes against the backdrop of [allegations of genocide](#) by the US, UK, Canada and others, as well as sanctions and boycotts of corporations with ties to the region.

Experts said Bachelet’s reputation, and that of the UN’s capabilities to investigate human rights abuses and hold China to account now hinged on her long-delayed report on Xinjiang.

Bachelet is no stranger to prisons. As a young woman in Chile in the 1970s, she was captured by secret service agents and held in a clandestine detention centre before her exile. Her father was tortured and died behind bars.

Despite her [personal experiences of repression](#) and a sterling reputation among UN peers, human rights experts and diplomats have been pessimistic that Bachelet will learn anything of value about China’s security apparatus and the plight of the Uyghurs. Nor is she expected to persuade Beijing to change course.





An anti-riot drill at a detention centre in Xinjiang is captured in this image released by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation © The Victims Of Communism Memoria/AFP/Getty Images

Instead, critics said, her tightly controlled mission has been undermined by relentless Chinese obstruction, refutations of wrongdoing and propaganda. The trip has also highlighted years of international failings to hold President [Xi Jinping](#)'s administration to account amid China's rising influence at the UN.

"All our like-minded countries have similar views on the visit: it's a win for China," said a senior European diplomat in Beijing. "The best thing she can do right now is be open about the access she's had."

Bachelet also played down the nature of her trip, saying it was an opportunity to hold "direct discussions" with China's most senior leaders on human rights.

"This visit was not an investigation — official visits by a high commissioner are by their nature high-profile and simply not conducive to the kind of detailed, methodical, discreet work of an investigative nature," she said.

In a series of earlier orchestrated events, Bachelet met foreign minister Wang Yi before speaking to Xi via video link.

Wang, the foreign minister, said Bachelet's trip would "help clarify misinformation" from "anti-China forces" as he presented her with a copy of Xi's book: *Excerpts from Xi Jinping on Respecting and Protecting Human Rights*. Photos of the exchange were circulated by China's foreign ministry and state media.

Chinese authorities have for years controlled access to the region, sealing it from journalists, diplomats and non-governmental organisations.

Richard Gowan, UN director at the International Crisis Group, said China had made the trip a "public relations mess for the UN" and put Bachelet's chance of improving the plight of the Uyghurs "maybe at 3 per cent".

But Gowan said the envoy's trip should be seen in the same light as UN secretary-general António Guterres's meeting with Russian leader Vladimir Putin last month.

"If the UN was not seen to go, that is even more damaging for the residual hope that UN can do some work of value," he said.

"In a sense, she is sacrificing herself because we've known from the get-go that there wouldn't be real Chinese transparency. It's a trap. But it's a trap that Bachelet had to walk into."

Complicating her role is a direction, set by Guterres, to keep China onside at the UN to combat climate change.

“The real tell will be the kind of report that emerges,” said Anjali Dayal, a UN expert at Fordham University in New York.

Dayal added that while it was characteristic that UN investigators “do not get the full picture”, Bachelet’s choices of sources and “efforts to counteract” Beijing would reveal the extent of her office’s independence, or its absence.

“It is unavoidable in her role to appear as though you are also taking the government seriously, even if you don’t plan to buy their story . . . The real measure of success will be whether or not she can issue a report that documents things beyond what she has been shown by the government,” she said.

Additional reporting by Arjun Neil Alim in Beijing

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