Dear Foreign Secretary,

Re: Human rights sanctions for abuses in Xinjiang

We write first with our congratulations on the launch of the United Kingdom’s global human rights sanctions regime last July. In the past year, the UK has taken decisive, much-needed action against many perpetrators of serious human rights abuses across the world. REDRESS commends the UK Government for its commitment to using sanctions as a tool for deterring such violations.

However, the UK Government must demonstrate the will to apply sanctions consistently in cases where individuals are committing gross abuses. This includes the imposition of sanctions on those involved in significant, well-documented abuses in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China.

In November 2020, REDRESS submitted a dossier of evidence to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, calling for sanctions designations for senior Chinese officials and entities linked to the grave violations in Xinjiang. The dossier contained extensive evidence from numerous credible authorities that document human rights violations against Uyghur and other minority populations in Xinjiang since late 2016. The submission was supported by more than 20 UK members of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.

As we noted then, the UK has used its sanctions power to respond to some of the most pressing human rights crises of today. The situation in Xinjiang so far has been a conspicuous omission. Several months later, this remains true.

The UK’s closest partners on foreign policy are taking strong action to condemn human rights violations in Xinjiang through targeted sanctions. The United States designated six individuals and two entities in July 2020. The European Union is expected to announce designations on Monday 22 March 2021. On the basis of credible information about extrajudicial detentions and forced labour, the UK Government has announced measures to help ensure that British organisations are not complicit in abuses in Xinjiang. While these measures signal that the UK is aware of ongoing violations, they fall well short of the steps taken by the UK’s partners, and the government’s own guidance, which demand the use of sanctions.
Designating Chinese officials and entities for violations in Xinjiang may have repercussions, but the UK should uphold its commitment to protect global human rights in all cases, whether difficult or easy. The UK cannot turn its back on the Uyghur and other minorities in Xinjiang who continue to suffer gross human rights abuses. Rather, the UK Government should stand with its key allies, and impose targeted sanctions on key individuals and entities responsible for the situation in Xinjiang.

Yours sincerely

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Director, REDRESS