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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Liberal International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.


[03 February 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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Call to release Professor Ilham Tohti

There are about 10 million Uighur people in China. They make up less than one percent of China's population and inhabit a region rich in oil and gas. The people have been subjected to unparalleled repression by the Chinese government in the past years due to their unique ethnic identity and religious beliefs. Since April 2017, over 1 million innocent Uighurs have been arbitrarily detained in a network of internment camps, where they are forced to renounce their ethnic identity and religious beliefs and swear loyalty to the Chinese government.

This statement would like to pay specific attention to Ilham Tohti's case, given the crucial international issues and human rights concerns on which it touches: the fostering of moderate Islamic values in the face of state-directed religious repression; efforts to open lines of dialogue between a Muslim minority and a non-Muslim majority population; and the suppression of non-violent dissent by an authoritarian state.

Ilham Tohti is a renowned Uighur human rights defender, economics professor and advocate for the rights of China's Uighur minority, who has for over two decades worked tirelessly to foster dialogue and understanding between Uighurs and Chinese. Tohti is known for his research on Uighur-Han relations and is a vocal advocate for the implementation of regional autonomy laws in China.

As a result of his activism, he was declared a "separatist" by the Chinese state and detained on separatism related charges. He was found guilty of these charges and all of his assets were seized, even though no evidence of Tohti's crimes was presented to his legal team. Furthermore, Tohti's legal team was denied access to their client for six months. In September 2014, he was sentenced to life imprisonment following a two-day show trial. Human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, have condemned the trial as an "affront of justice".

During the course of his imprisonment, Tohti has been a subject to recurring violations of international human rights. Despite what has been done to him, he remains a voice of moderation and reconciliation. For much of his imprisonment, Ilham Tohti has been denied visits. The United Nations Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under any Form of Detention or Imprisonment specifies that communication of the detained or imprisoned person with the outside world, and in particular his family or counsel, shall not be denied for more than a matter of days.

For his advocacy work, Ilham Tohti has been awarded the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award (2014), the Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders (2016), the Liberal International Prize for Freedom (2017), the Vaclav Havel Human Rights Prize (2019), and the Freedom House's Freedom Award (2019). He was nominated for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought in (2016) and was awarded the Sakharov Prize in 2019 for his work in the face of adversity. Professor Tohti has also been nominated for the 2018 and 2019 Nobel Peace Prize.

Liberal International calls on the Chinese authorities to grant visiting rights for Ilham Tohti's family and lawyers. As his conviction was based on a show trial, we call on Chinese authorities to release Ilham Tohti from prison and to drop all charges against him.

Further, the Chinese authorities should act to put a stop to the persecution of the Uighur minority in China and the Chinese judiciary in the region should adhere to the constitutional rights of all Xinjiang citizenry.

Finally, the international community should continue to raise awareness of the situation in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, China, and the case of Ilham Tohti and set up an international tribunal to investigate Chinese claims that there is full religious and cultural freedom in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, and the extent of oppression of Muslim Uighurs in the region.