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Statement: Chinese authorities must end personal attacks against Turkic women human rights defenders

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the personal attacks by Chinese authorities and State media apparatus against Uyghur, Kazakh and other Turkic women, who have publicly spoken out against the grave human rights violations committed against them, their family members or other minorities in northwestern China, an area the Uyghur people call East Turkistan, and is referred to by the Chinese government as Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The women human rights defenders who have been targeted in such attacks have spoken publicly on human rights violations including arbitrary detention, rape, torture, family separation, and forced sterilisation, and are all currently residing outside of China.

These public attacks by Chinese government officials and state media outlets included [explicit references](#) to the women's personal and private details, including information related to their medical history or conditions. The attacks are ad hominem and often irrelevant to the women's testimonies, exploiting entrenched gender stereotypes, sexism and misogyny, and playing explicitly and implicitly on gendered tropes.

Family members of the women human rights defenders have also been used in articles, State-organised press conferences, and videos published by State media in which they criticised the women for “spreading rumours” and “lying” about their experience in detention. The broadcast of family members' testimonies, likely achieved through coercion, to discredit individuals exposing human rights violations is consistent with a [broader strategy](#) of using State media to negatively portray human rights defenders and extract forced confessions, which are often then televised.

At a daily [press conference](#) on 23 February 2021, a spokesperson for China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Wang Wenbin, attacked Tursunay Ziyawudun, a Uyghur woman human rights defender, for revealing to the [BBC](#) and [CNN](#) the abuses she suffered and witnessed during nearly ten months of arbitrary detention in Xinjiang in 2018, including rape and forced insertion of an intrauterine device. He held up a photograph of Tursunay Ziyawudun and another Uyghur woman human rights defender, Zumrat Dawut, while he spoke.

During a [press conference](#) on 4 February 2021, the same spokesperson attacked Zumrat Dawut, while holding up a photograph of her, for [revealing to international media](#) that she was forcibly sterilised, allegedly for having too many children. Earlier in November 2019, the State-owned tabloid *The Global Times* [published](#) an article and a video in which one of Zumrat Dawut's brothers in Xinjiang called on her to stop “spreading rumours”. Two days later, on 6 February 2021, State media again attacked Zumrat Dawut in an article that was published simultaneously by numerous State media outlets, including [Xinhua News](#) and

[China Global Television Network](#) (CGTN), the sister channel of China's State broadcaster CCTV.

The same 6 February 2021 article also attacked the [accounts](#) provided to international media by Uyghur woman human rights defender Mihrigul Tursun concerning the beating and torture she reportedly suffered during several periods of arbitrary detention since 2015. In March 2019, CGTN broadcast an English-language [segment](#) in which Mihrigul Tursun's mother and brother accused her of lying about the death of one of her triplet sons. The segment also includes an interview with a male Han Chinese doctor who discussed personal medical details about one of Mihrigul's sons. Close-up shots of what appear to be medical and identity documents in which the name, date of birth and other personal information of her son are visible, were also shown in the segment.

At a [press conference](#) on 10 February 2021 in Beijing, Xu Guixiang, Deputy Head of the Propaganda Department of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region's Committee of the Communist Party of China, attacked [Gulbahar Haitiwaji](#), a Uyghur woman human rights defender who was persuaded to return to China from France and then detained for three years between 2016 and 2019. Gulbahar Haitiwaji published a [book](#) recounting her ordeal after she was released and returned to France in late 2019. The Xinjiang official derided her allegation of forced sterilisation and said it was "laughable" that sterilisation should still be necessary for a woman of her age (55).

Survivors and other witnesses who provide evidence to substantiate credible allegations of gross human rights violations with the aim to promote the right to truth and pursue accountability, are human rights defenders. The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders provides that everyone has the right to freely "publish, impart or disseminate to others views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms", and "to draw public attention to those matters."

Survivor testimonies concerning the most serious [international crimes](#) in China are key to promoting the right to truth, particularly when the Chinese government has been unwilling to grant meaningful and unfettered access to independent and impartial observers. The collection, consolidation, preservation and analysis of these testimonies and other evidence may facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings, in national, regional or international courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes.

These personal attacks by high-level officials and the State propaganda apparatus contravene both Chinese and international law, as well as human rights commitments the government has made to the international community.

China's [Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women](#) guarantees women's rights of reputation, honour, privacy, and portrait. The Law prohibits injuring or debasing women's reputation or personal dignity by insult, slander or other means by public media or otherwise. The Law also prohibits the use of a woman's portrait without her consent.

Between 1-5 March 2021, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) initiated its [preliminary review](#) of the Chinese government's

[latest report](#) on its implementation of the Convention. The government report states clearly that, "...to promote gender equality in the mainstream media and foster a public opinion environment that respects women and gender equality, China has continuously strengthened its gender equality monitoring mechanism in the media industry, relying on new media to widely disseminate the concept of gender equality." In October 2020, Chinese president Xi Jinping [told](#) a high-level UN event that his government was "prepared to do even more" to advance women's rights worldwide and urged the world to "eliminate prejudice, discrimination and violence against women and make gender equality a social norm and moral imperative observed by all." The government's attacks against Uyghur and other women human rights defenders run counter to these claims.

Front Line Defenders is concerned that the medical history and conditions, regardless of their veracity, of these women human rights defenders have been shared publicly, without their consent, in attempts to discredit their testaments of violations, and further, that some medical professionals are involved in these gendered attacks. Front Line Defenders echoes the [concerns](#) raised last week by the UN Special Rapporteur on counter-terrorism and human rights that governments have "placed institutions and professions which have traditionally functioned as the guardians of health, maternity, education and welfare onto the enforcement edge of national security policies." The Special Rapporteur warned that the impact from "securitizing front-line care and intervention are significant in terms of the quality of care they receive and the stigma and harm that results from being treated as security threats rather than individuals and families with needs and rights."

Front Line Defenders calls on the Chinese government to immediately cease all forms of smear-mongering and harassment against Uyghur, Kazakh, and other Turkic women human rights defenders who expose serious international crimes, as well as their family members.

This State-orchestrated smear campaign, and the gendered tropes it plays on, is a stark reminder that the Chinese governments repeated rhetoric of its commitment to human rights protection and gender equality is deceptive and lacking credibility. It heightens the urgency for the international community to take decisive actions, as [called](#) for by 50 UN Special Procedures mandate holders in June 2020, to ensure accountability for the widespread and systematic human rights violations in China.

Front Line Defenders reiterates its recommendations to UN Member States to: convene a Special Session of the Human Rights Council to evaluate the range of violations by the Chinese government, including violations against human rights defenders; establish and adequately resource an impartial and independent UN mechanism to closely monitor, analyse, and report annually on these issues; and support the Secretary-General in appointing a Special Envoy on China, consistent with his Call to Action on Human Rights, and the High Commissioner for Human Rights to fulfill her independent mandate to monitor and publicly report on China's widespread rights violations.