

EU, US, UK, Canada target China officials over Uyghur abuses

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US Secretary of State Antony Blinken says the sanctions send "a strong signal" to those who abuse human rights. (AP: Omer Kuscu)

The European Union, Britain, Canada and the United States have launched coordinated sanctions against officials in China over human rights abuses in the far western Xinjiang region, provoking swift retaliation from Beijing.

The EU targeted four senior officials in Xinjiang, involving a freeze on their assets and a ban on travelling in the bloc.

Key points:

- European Union sanctions relating to Xinjiang have been met with swift retaliation from Beijing
- Australian Parliament this week debated China's policies towards the Uyghurs with some MPs comparing the situation to the Holocaust
- The EU also sanctioned officials in Libya, Russia, South Sudan and Eritrea

The 27-nation bloc also froze the assets of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps Public Security Bureau, which it describes as a "state-owned economic and paramilitary organisation" that runs Xinjiang and controls its economy.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the measures were part of "intensive diplomacy" by the UK, the US, Canada and the 27-nation EU to force action amid mounting evidence about serious rights abuses against the Uyghur Muslim people.

Foreign Minister Marise Payne welcomed the sanctions in a joint statement with her New Zealand counterpart Nanaia Mahuta.

"Australia and New Zealand welcome the measures announced overnight by Canada, the European Union, the United Kingdom and the United States. We share these countries' deep concerns, which are held across the Australian and New Zealand communities," the statement said.

"In particular, there is clear evidence of severe human rights abuses that include restrictions on freedom of religion, mass surveillance, large-scale extra-judicial detentions, as well as forced labour and forced birth control, including sterilisation."

The sanctions came a day after Australian Parliament debated the issue.

A dozen MPs from the Coalition, Labor, and the Greens spoke in favour of a motion put forward by veteran Liberal MP Kevin Andrews which expresses "abhorrence" at "systematic" breaches of human rights in China, particularly against ethnic minorities.

'Justice for the many victims'

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement that "a united transatlantic response sends a strong signal to those who violate or abuse international human rights, and we will take further actions in coordination with like-minded partners."

"We will continue to stand with our allies around the world in calling for an immediate end to the PRC's crimes and for justice for the many victims," Mr Blinken said.

China responded immediately to the EU's move, slapping sanctions on 10 European individuals and four institutions that it said had damaged China's interests and "maliciously spread lies and disinformation".

Initially, China denied the existence of camps for detaining Uyghurs in Xinjiang but has since described them as centres to provide job training and to reeducate those exposed to radical jihadi thinking. Officials deny all charges of human rights abuses there.

Xinjiang had been a hotbed of anti-government violence, but Beijing claims its massive security crackdown brought peace in recent years.



China denies abuses and insists life for Uyghurs is improving. (AP: Sam McNeil)

China's Foreign Ministry denounced the EU sanctions as "based on nothing but lies and disinformation" as it issued its own retaliatory measures.

The ministry announced sanctions against 10 individuals and four institutions, saying that they and their family members would be barred from entering mainland China, Hong Kong or Macao and cut off from financial dealings with those areas.

Among those targeted was Adrian Zenz, a US-based German scholar who has publicised abuses against minority groups in China's regions of Tibet and Xinjiang.

China has said companies and individuals have petitioned to sue Dr Zenz, but it wasn't clear who the plaintiffs were or how they would pursue legal action across borders.

Others targeted for sanctions include five members of the European Parliament.

The Chinese Embassy in Australia was also quick to respond to Ms Payne's comments, saying "they once again fully expose the deep-seated ideological prejudices and the despicable tactic of smearing China on the Australian side."

"We call on Australia to reflect upon and address its own problems, in particular the killings of innocent civilians by Australian overseas military personnel, the worsening situation of racial discrimination, the long-standing insufficiency in the protection of the rights of aboriginal [sic] peoples as well as the inhumane treatment of detainees in the off-shore detention centres."

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who chaired the meeting of foreign ministers, expressed dismay at China's reaction and said the EU's sanctions respect the "highest standards of rule of law."



Mr Borrell describes Western coordination on Xinjiang as "perfect". (AP: Aris Oikonomou)

"Rather than change its policies and address our legitimate concerns, China has again turned a blind eye, and these measures are regrettable and unacceptable," Mr Borrell said.

"There will be no change in European Union determination to defend human rights and to respond to serious violations and abuses," he added, and described the coordination between the EU, Britain, Canada and the US as "perfect."

The new EU sanction system is similar to the Magnitsky Act —Obama-era legislation that authorises the US government to sanction those it sees as human rights offenders, freeze their assets and ban them from entering the United States.

As part of Monday's move, the EU also imposed sanctions over repression in North Korea, "extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in Libya, torture and repression against LGBTIQ people and political opponents in Chechnya in Russia, and torture, extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and killings in South Sudan and Eritrea," a statement said.