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Tibet Action Institute
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Mr. Tim Cook
Chief Executive Officer
Apple Inc.
1 Infinite Loop
Cupertino, CA 95014 USA

19 November 2019

Dear Mr. Cook,

We, a coalition of civil, political, and ethical rights organizations are following up on a letter that we sent to you in August 2017¹ concerning Apple's removal of over 600 Virtual Private Network (VPN) applications from the iOS App Store in China and the transfer of Apple users' iCloud data to a Chinese state-run telecom company. We regret after over two years we have yet to receive a response from you about our serious concerns, including Apple denying users access to uncensored internet at the request of the Chinese Government.

As raised in our previous letter, China's censorship efforts have a chilling effect on civil society and severely restrict and limit the civil and political rights of those living under Chinese rule. China's Great Firewall prevents the population from accessing a large number of foreign websites, particularly those portraying China negatively or which are critical of the government's human rights record. At the request of the Chinese Communist Party, Apple has personally removed many of these apps from its App Store in China, including the New York Times and Quartz apps.

In July 2019, Apple admitted to acting on further requests by the Chinese government by removing 517 apps in China. These removals are in addition to the 600 VPN apps that Apple confessed to blocking in 2017. By not allowing people living under Chinese rule to remain anonymous online, Apple is directly undermining the safety and security of human rights advocates working tirelessly for greater freedoms and disregarding the serious concerns of global citizens who believe in an open and equally accessible web for *everyone*.

By restricting content in order to comply with China's draconian measures to control online activity, Apple is encouraging an environment in which censorship and distorted information is normalized and is further facilitating a crackdown on human rights by a repressive regime, including in Tibet, East Turkistan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. We are deeply concerned that Apple not only continues

¹ https://docs.google.com/document/d/13Xr12dKGclqFfyIOjGKavRsmh6fCri08_OkpXfCED8I/

to facilitate these censorship efforts by the Chinese government but is actually helping accelerate them.

Furthermore, on 9 October 2019—less than a day after Apple was criticized by Chinese state media² for allowing HKmap³ in the App Store—the crowdsourced map app said it had been delisted.⁴ We have seen reports that you claim the app was taken down because it "was being used maliciously to target individual officers for violence." This has been strongly disputed not only by the developers of the app, but also by those using it on the ground and the international observers on the ground who argue the violations described do not match up with what the app displays.⁵ In fact, it is widely believed that the app did nothing more than provide people with crucial information about the location of pro-democracy demonstrations, street closures, and police activity, including their dispersal of tear-gas.⁶

Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012, the human rights situation in China and all areas under Chinese rule has deteriorated significantly. At least one million Uyghurs are known to be locked up in re-education military camps⁷ and Tibet was listed as the second least free place in the world with only Syria ranking as less free.⁸ In addition, growing pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong have been met with a disproportionate use of force, including the use of live ammunition by police and the torture and ill-treatment of those detained.⁹ The recent police siege at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the firing of tear gas and rubber bullets at those trying to flee, including students, volunteer medics, journalists and social workers, demonstrates the authorities total disregard for human rights and the rule of law.

Furthermore, Xi has overseen an unprecedented clampdown on civil society and indeed all citizens living under China's rule face extreme restrictions on access to free and open internet, leading Freedom House to last week label the Beijing government as "the world's worst abuser of internet freedom" for the fourth consecutive year.¹⁰

Apple has historically championed itself as a leader in the fight for freedom of expression and a free and open internet. However, the company is at extreme risk of irreversibly damaging its global reputation if it continues to put the wishes of the Chinese government above the human rights of Tibetans, Uyghurs, Chinese citizens, and other nationalities living under China's rule.

² <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/1010/c90000-9621564.html>

³ <https://hkmap.live/>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HKmap.live>

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/oct/10/tim-cook-apple-hong-kong-mapping-app-removal>

⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/09/hong-kong-arbitrary-arrests-brutal-beatings-and-torture-in-police-detention-revealed/>

⁷ <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/china-says-claims-1-million-uyghurs-put-in-camps-completely-untrue/>

⁸ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/tibet>

⁹ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/11/hong-kong-investigate-shooting-protesters-another-low-police-use-force/>

¹⁰ <https://www.freedomonthenet.org/country/china/freedom-on-the-net/2019>

We call on Apple to stop capitulating to China's authoritarian government and immediately:

- Reinstate HKmap.Live and Virtual Private Networks to the iOS App Store in China;
- Cease the transfer of Apple users' iCloud data to a Chinese state-run telecom company and confirm publicly that Apple will adhere to the company's Privacy policy that commits to protecting privacy as a "fundamental human right" as part of Apple's core values.¹¹
- Draft, publicize, and enforce a clear policy stating that Apple will not assist states in their censorship efforts by undermining freedom of expression and human rights.

We would like to take this opportunity to renew our request for a meeting with you in order to discuss the human rights implications for Tibetan, Uyghur, Hong Kong, and Chinese activists and citizens, and to outline why we are urging the company to stop facilitating the human rights crackdown in China. Please contact Mandie McKeown at mandie@tibetnetwork.org to discuss arranging this meeting.

Yours Sincerely,

Lhadon Tethong, Director
Tibet Action Institute

Sondhya Gupta, Campaign Manager
SumOfUs

Mandie McKeown, Campaigns Coordinator
International Tibet Network

Dolkun Isa, President
World Uyghur Congress

John Jones, Campaigns and Advocacy Manager
Free Tibet

Dorjee Tseten, Executive Director
Students for a Free Tibet

Rushan Abbas, Founder
Campaign for Uyghurs

Fight for Freedom | Stand With Hong Kong

Teng Biao, Chinese Human Rights Lawyer
and visiting fellow at the Asia Law Institute,
New York University

¹¹ <https://www.apple.com/privacy/>