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Andrew Hoffman

Nike's Response to Human Rights Abuse Claims in China

Nike's new Chief Sustainability Officer Seth Millerⁱ watched a YouTube livestream on October 17, 2019 as the U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China held a hearing entitled "Forced Labor, Mass Internment, and Social Control in Xinjiang." During the hearing, Representative Thomas Suozzi (D-New York) accused Nike and other brands, including Adidas, Gap, and Patagonia, of selling products potentially made with materials sourced from Xinjiang, a region in China famous for its cotton production and infamous for accusations of forced labor. Xinjiang was also the primary location where an ethnic minority, the Uyghur people (English spelling, Uighurs), were being interned.^{1,2}

Miller had been in his new position for a year and now the supply chain that he and his colleagues had thoughtfully developed and monitored to reduce the risk of harmful social and environmental impact was being called into question by members of the United States government. Miller knew that Nike's chief operating officer and president of advanced innovation would be expecting his call within the hour and he needed to swiftly and carefully respond to the accusations.

Questions filled Miller's head: Were any of Nike's long-standing manufacturing partners willingly or unwillingly employing slave labor or using raw materials obtained through slave labor? Nike had oversight of its suppliers to adhere to the International Labor Organization (ILO) standards, but how much influence did the company have over the Chinese government to follow them? If the accusations were true, should Nike leave China as a supply base and market? How would this decision impact Nike's profit, U.S. relations with China, and the Uyghur population itself? How would Nike explain its response to the media, its consumers, its suppliers, and its own staff?

ⁱ Seth Miller is a pseudonym.

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