

China: Protests in Xinjiang point to deepening social tensions

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8 July 2009

Chinese security forces brutally suppressed a protest by thousands of people in Urumqi, the capital of the western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, on Sunday. The ongoing ethnic tensions are an indication of a growing social and political crisis in China fuelled by the deepening global economic recession.

The oil-rich central Asian province of Xinjiang is home to China's eight million Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking Muslim minority. Xinjiang has a population of 20 million and includes Han Chinese, along with Hui Muslims, Mongols, Kazaks and other Central Asian minorities. The strategically-located province borders Afghanistan, Russia, India and Pakistan and is a corridor for Chinese-built oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia.

The Sunday protest initially involved about 300 Uighur students at the Grand Bazaar of Urumqi at 6 pm and was sparked by angry demands for justice over an attack on Uighur workers last week in southern China. The Sunday demonstration quickly swelled to more than 1,000, as onlookers and bus passengers joined in. The police arrived soon after and at around 7 pm the protestors began hurling rocks and vegetables at the police and then attacked Han civilians and nearby shops. The unrest continued for several hours before riot police and paramilitary troops suppressed the protest with fire hoses, tear gas and batons.

According to official statistics, at least 156 people were killed and more than 1,000 injured. Over 200 shops and 14 homes were damaged and 261 vehicles torched during the riot. It is virtually impossible, however, to verify how many Uighur protestors were killed during the clashes because Chinese authorities cut Internet and mobile phone services to Urumqi.

The state media and government officials are exacerbating tensions by presenting a picture of violent Uighurs attacking Han people. Yesterday, thousands of Han Chinese armed with knives, axes and steel pipes marched into Urumqi's Uighur neighbourhood, threatening revenge. Fearing a full-scale eruption of ethnic clashes throughout the city, riot police quelled the Han Chinese demonstrators with tear gas.

The Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime declared the Urumqi protest on Sunday a "violent crime" that deserved to be suppressed and blamed it on the "three forces"—separatism, terrorism and extremism—allegedly encouraged by various exile Uighur groups. This response echoes Beijing's claims that the protests in Tibet during March 2008 were instigated by the exiled Dalai Lama.

A government statement denounced pre-meditated, "organised violent crime" that was "instigated and directed from abroad, and carried out by outlaws in the country". Beijing blamed the World Uighur Congress

(WUC), headed by exiled businesswoman Rebiya Kadeer.

The WUC rejected Beijing's allegations, stating that up to 10,000 participated in the Sunday demonstration and claiming that 600 protestors were killed. The Uighur American Association (UAA) claimed that two dozen students were shot or crushed to death by heavily-armed troops and armoured vehicles that stormed into Xinjiang University. Using pictures taken at the scene, the UAA said the student protest was initially peaceful, not anti-government and that demonstrators held Chinese national flags. It only turned violent, the UAA stated, after the police attacked the crowd.

Beijing is acutely aware that these clashes could trigger much wider unrest. The government has imposed curfews on Urumqi and is maintaining its block on most mobile phone and Internet connections. A total of 20,000 security personnel armed with automatic rifles and armoured vehicles have been deployed to lock down the city. According to one estimate, police have arrested 1,434 people.

Despite this heavy security, hundreds of Uighurs, mainly women, confronted heavily-armed police in Urumqi on Tuesday to demand the immediate release of their husbands and sons. A small protest was also reported in Kashgar, Xinjiang's the second largest city, on Monday.

The class issues

The initial trigger for these angry demonstrations was far from Xinjiang—a violent brawl early last week between Uighur and Han workers at the Early Light toy factory in Shaoguan city, Guangdong province, a major export zone in southern China.

Early Light, which is owned by a Hong Kong tycoon, recently recruited 800 Uighur workers in line with government efforts to encourage companies to hire cheaper labour from poor ethnic minorities, amid a massive decline in export orders. A Han worker who lost his job posted a message on a local web site alleging that six Uighur workers had raped two girls at the factory—a claim later found by the police to be false.

The bogus claim, driven by ethnic prejudices encouraged by Beijing's promotion of Han chauvinism, led to a violent attack on Uighurs at the factory dormitory. Two Uighurs were killed, 81 injured and more than 400 police were called in to break up the fight.

Although the individual responsible for spreading the rumour was

arrested, video footage of the vicious attack on the Uighur workers was posted on the Internet and quickly ignited the angry demonstrations in Xinjiang, thousands of kilometres away.

Along with concerns about the killings, the protests were fuelled by frustrations over Beijing's failure to provide decent living standards and democratic rights for Uighurs, and widening social inequality, including between working people in Xinjiang and other interior regions and the wealthy in the eastern provinces.

Xinjiang is experiencing an energy boom following the completion of a 4,200-kilometre west-east pipeline carrying gas to Shanghai. Natural gas production in Tarim Basin has increased 20-fold between 2000 and 2007 but the vast profits have not benefited the local masses.

According to a *Financial Times* article last August, the Xinjiang government only received 240 million yuan from the 14.8 billion yuan of tax revenue generated by petrochemical industries in the region in 2005. Ethnic discrimination is rife, with few Uighurs employed in the oil industry and only in low-paid jobs. A former PetroChina employee told the *Financial Times* there were only two Uighur drivers at the company's Korla subsidy. "But they were moved to a different work unit because the bosses think Muslims are terrorists and separatists," he said.

In order to strengthen its control over the region, Beijing has established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) with Russia and four Central Asian states to counter the US presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia since 2001. The SCO has conducted numerous "anti-terror" exercises, including in Xinjiang, in preparation for the suppression of any separatist insurgency. These repressive measures have generated more hostility toward Beijing. In April, two Uighurs were executed for attacks last August that killed 16 policemen in Xinjiang.

At the same time, Washington's endorsement of Beijing's "war on terror" has legitimised the Stalinist regime's claims that all opposition in Xinjiang is "terrorist". In 2001, the former Bush administration struck a deal with China to define the separatist East Turkestan Islamic Movement as a "terrorist" organisation in order to secure Beijing's support for the US invasion of Afghanistan. The US military captured 22 Uighurs (Chinese nationals) in Afghanistan and locked them up at Guantánamo Bay. Today, few countries are willing to accept the detainees even though the US administration has found no basis to keep holding them.

The Uighurs comprise about 10 percent of Urumqi's 2.3 million people and are among the city's most oppressed layers. Beijing's police-state methods in the province and its policy of encouraging Han Chinese migration have deepened tensions in the region.

Above all the ethnic tensions in Xinjiang highlight the fragile character of Chinese capitalism, which has intensified the exploitation of the entire working class and is generating enormous social and ethnic divisions throughout the country.

Market reform, moreover, has undermined the previous ideological legitimacy of the CCP and its claim to be a socialist movement. The turn to Han chauvinism by the regime, which is aimed at bolstering its support among sections of the urban middle classes and the new capitalist elite, has profound political implications in a country with more than 50 ethnic minorities that account for over 100 million people.

The Xinjiang protests are an explosive manifestation of a deepening ideological and political crisis. After taking power in 1949, the CCP used

its claims of building a socialist future that would end racial discrimination to secure the support of most ethnic minorities in China. However, the 1949 revolution, which was not socialist or communist, but based on the Stalinist perspective of a national road to socialism, has led to an open turn to the capitalist market by the Maoist regime over the past 30 years.

Beijing's transformation of China into the workshop of the capitalist world has not only drastically widened social inequality but undermined its ability to control or mediate ethnic relations.

Jian Junbao, a professor at Shanghai-based Fudan University, noted in the *Asia Times* today: "Today, common people aren't really considered the owners of the country, and labourers are no longer a respected class. Capitalists have become the government's guest of honour.... The shared identity of the Chinese—as socialist labour—is gradually falling to pieces. The resulting riots in Urumqi may be just the start of something much, much bigger."

So far Washington has not openly condemned Beijing's repression, even though the US Congress has directly financed the Uighur exile groups in order to pressure China. Compared to last year's unrest in Tibet, which the US and European governments exploited to threaten to boycott the Beijing Olympics, Washington's response to the Xinjiang protests has been more cautious. White House press secretary Robert Gibbs simply called "on all in Xinjiang to exercise restraint".

With massive US investment in China, and Beijing now its largest foreign creditor, the heavily-indebted US has a direct economic stake in keeping China's working class under control. Like Beijing, Washington is concerned that unrest in Xinjiang could ignite wider social explosions in China.



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