

Chinese leadership demands “severe punishment” of Xinjiang protestors

John Chan
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At a crisis meeting on Wednesday night, China’s Stalinist leadership ordered severe police repression against the unrest in the north-western province of Xinjiang. President Hu Jintao cut his trip to the G8 summit in Italy and returned to the country to attend the meeting.

In a statement issued yesterday, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Politburo Standing Committee declared: “We must by law severely attack those hard-core elements who planned and organised this incident.” The statement again blamed the unrest on overseas organisations, citing the “three forces” of separatism, terrorism and extremism.

In fact, the protests erupted last Sunday among Uighur students and workers in Urumqi, the provincial capital, over the bashing to death of two Uighur workers in a toy export factory in southern Guangdong province last month.

The July 5 protests and subsequent police-military repression have officially caused 156 deaths (mainly Han Chinese people reportedly killed by rioters) and led to the arrests of 1,500 people. Uighur exiled groups, however, have claimed that the death toll is much higher, and consists mainly of Uighur protestors killed by security forces and Han mobs.

Amid massive job losses throughout China, the Politburo’s belligerent message reflects deep concern in the CCP leadership that Xinjiang’s unrest could have broader ramifications. “Instigators, organizers, culprits and violent criminals in the unrest shall be severely punished in accordance with the law,” the statement said, while adding that those “taking part in the riot due to provocation and deceit by separatists, should be given education”.

While Urumqi’s mayor, Jerla Ismaudin, has proclaimed the return of calm to the city, massive military parades continued in the streets yesterday, aimed at intimidating potential opposition. Paramilitary officers marched in columns hundreds of metres long, and the security forces kept Han Chinese and Uighur districts separated.

In the evening, 8,000 troops were crammed into trucks and armoured personnel carriers as helicopters hovered above the city in another show of force. Vans with loudspeakers blared: “Protect the people!” and “Maintain stability”. Some 5,000 paramilitary troop reinforcements were deployed on Wednesday, bringing the total security force to 25,000.

Hu sent the highest state security chief, Zhou Yongkang, to Urumqi, where he told the elite special police: “[You] should crack down on the criminals in accordance with the law ... I hope you will do your best to maintain ethnic unity”. Earlier, local CCP boss Li Zhi declared that rioters would be executed.

For fear of causing a broader confrontation, the Politburo statement singled out a “tiny few” leading protestors. It also called for national unity and an end to communal violence, emphasising that “Han people cannot be separated from national minorities”. The Beijing regime is acutely aware that the country could be torn apart if further ethnic tensions develop.

The leadership has mobilised every conservative force it can, from religious leaders to ethnic minority elites and Chinese overseas diaspora organisations, to denounce the unrest in Xinjiang. Obul Hashim Haxim, a local imam who is a member of the National Peoples Congress, called on Uighur Muslims “to do their part to protect ethnic unity and social stability for a harmonious society”.

Local authorities put up red stickers in residential areas, saying, “Don’t listen to any rumours” and “Keep calm and maintain public order”. Nevertheless, thousands of residents—Uighur and Han alike—are fleeing the city and flooding into bus and train stations and the airport, fearing further violence. Uighurs are leaving for southern Xinjiang cities and towns where the Uighur population is more predominant.

At the train station, a Uighur worker travelling to Kashgar told the *South China Morning Post*: “I still have parents at

home to support. It's not worth risking your life for a job". A Han migrant miner from Anhui expressed similar fears, saying that 12 of his 20 colleagues had left for home. A local bus station director said 200,000 students could leave the city this week.

The *Post* reported: "The authorities appeared happy to help the students leave, summoning hundreds of extra buses from across the region to take them away." The regime is keen to see students, both Uighur and Han, leave, as any unrest among them could ignite a wider movement, especially as college graduates face rising unemployment.

Heavy security measures have been imposed in other centres of Xinjiang, such as Kashgar, where a small protest on Monday was crushed. An Internet café manager told the Associated Press (AP): "The city has a heavy military presence and it feels like a ghost town. No one is really walking around on the streets, whereas it's usually with people and traffic." He added that many businesses, especially those operated by Han Chinese, were closed because of the fear of riots similar to those in Urumqi.

Beijing is carrying out a PR campaign by inviting foreign journalists to visit Urumqi, unlike its efforts to block coverage from Tibet during protests last year. But the claim of being more transparent flies in the face of the severe restrictions that have been imposed on electronic communications. The official media centre set up in Urumqi is one of the few places where Internet access has not been cut.

Internet control has been tightened nationally, and video and social networking sites such as Youku and Fanfou have been blocked from providing information about the unrest in Urumqi. A report by Bloomberg on July 9 noted that the Facebook and YouTube web sites were inaccessible in many parts of China.

One reason for the Internet censorship is that although Uighur protestors have burned shops and killed Han civilians, there are reports that the security forces provoked the violence and then suppressed demonstrators with force. A Uighur student named Parizat told AP on Wednesday that the July 5 protestors initially carried Chinese national flags and that he was shocked by the repression: "I never thought something like this would happen. We're all Chinese citizens."

In a briefing to the Italian parliament this week, an exiled Uighur leader, Erkin Alptekin, insisted that 140 protestors were killed at first and their bodies were tossed onto trucks and taken away. "When the Uighurs heard the people were fired upon, parents all came out looking for their sons and daughters", but the security forces dispersed them with batons, tear gas and

bullets. Alptekin told AP that a total of 600 to 800 Uighurs were killed and 3,000 were arrested.

The roots of the ethnic conflict lie in the CCP regime's pro-capitalist measures, which have led to deepening social inequality throughout the entire country. During an interview with Qatar's Al-Jazeera Television, Uighur exiled leader Rebiya Kadeer presented a photograph of massive columns of Chinese troops on the streets of Shishou city in Hubei province on June 21, cracking down on protests of workers and the poor. She claimed that the scene was from Urumqi. Her apparent mistake simply underscored the basic fact that Beijing's police-state suppression is aimed against the working class as a whole.

While backward elements in the Han and Uighur communities have promoted communal hatred, feeding off the tensions generated by deepening social inequality, ordinary people have expressed dismay at the tragic ethnic conflicts. A toilet cleaner in her 60s, Zhu Xinqin, told Singapore's *Strait Times* in tears: "Interview me. I have things to tell the world". She said: "Forty years in Xinjiang and I have never seen this. My neighbours are Uighurs and they treat me like their mother. My heart hurts. It pains me. I saw what happened. First, the Uighurs attacked the Han Chinese. Then, the Han Chinese attacked the Uighurs... Please stop, please stop fighting".

A Uighur surgeon at Xinjiang Peoples Hospital, which treated more than 320 people last Sunday, told Xinhua news agency: "In our eyes there were no ethnicities, but the injured." He added: "Our hospital is a multi-ethnic collective with 13 ethnicities, like a family. I really don't understand why this happened."



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