Chinese regime admits shooting protestors in Xinjiang

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Despite the efforts of the Chinese government to play down the tense atmosphere in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, Beijing has effectively admitted it carried out a brutal military-police repression against ethnic Uighur protests earlier this month.

Last Saturday Xinjiang provincial chairman Nur Berki acknowledged for the first time that the security forces shot dead 12 protestors during the riots on July 5 and subsequently in Urumqi, the provincial capital. He insisted the shootings were "legal" and justified the killings as necessary to suppress a violent crime organised by exiled Uighur separatist groups like the Uighur World Congress.

On the following day, Eligen Imibakhi, chairman of the Xinjiang Regional People's Congress, declared that the legislature had pushed through new procedures to "provide legal support for Xinjiang's war against separatism and crackdown on terrorism"—that is, to legalise intensified police repression.

The real death toll of Uighur protesters is likely to be far higher. The Uighur World Congress has claimed that 400 people were killed and insists the protests turned violent only after the police assaulted an initially peaceful protest. The demonstration was held to demand justice over an incident in late June in Guangdong province, in which two Uighur workers at a toy factory were killed.

To justify the brutal crackdown, the official Xinhua news agency published a story last weekend claiming that the protest, which swelled to thousands, was a coordinated "crime" in more than 50 locations throughout Urumqi. Xinhua suggested that weapons had been stockpiled ahead of the protests. "Knives became hot-selling products two or three days before the unrest," Xinhua declared, citing a local business owner. It also alleged that the protestors were surprisingly quick in learning how to ignite the fuel tanks of vehicles, indicating prior training.

This scenario, based on little or no evidence, recalls the state propaganda that followed the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, when the military killed hundreds, if not thousands, of protesting workers. The regime also painted a false picture of a pre-planned "counter-revolutionary rebellion", in which "mobs" of "hooligans" who burned military vehicles deserved death.

Xinhua made no mention of the Han mobs who suddenly turned up with homemade weapons of sticks, knives and axes and threatened communal revenge against Uighurs. The purpose of citing the death toll of 197 and 1,721 wounded, mostly Han civilians, during the riot, was to justify the heavy security measures now in force throughout the region and to intimidate workers and the rural poor of all ethnic backgrounds.

According to a *Financial Times* article on July 19 based on internal sources from Chinese security apparatus, Beijing was flying more armed police into Xinjiang. The build up could reach 130,000 before October (up from around 100,000 now), when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will hold a major celebration of the 60th anniversary of its coming to power.

The actual figure of arrested Uighurs was more than 4,000—much higher than the official number of around 1,400. "According to a person present at a Communist party meeting discussing the crackdown, Urumqi's prisons are full and newly arrested people are being held in a People's Liberation Army warehouse," the *Financial Times* reported.

Paramilitary police have established checkpoints on all main roads in Urumqi and other Xinjiang cities such as Kashgar to carry out identity checks, especially of Uighur passengers. A security source told the *Financial Times*: "It may have been possible for Uighurs to get out of Urumqi on the same day but now no one is going to slip through the net." Several rural counties in southern Xinjiang suspected of harbouring Uighur protestors have been sealed off entirely.

For all Beijing's talk of maintaining ethnic unity, the secret police arrested Uighur economist Ilham Tohti, who teaches at Beijing's Central University for Nationalities, within days of the July 5 protests in Urumqi. His web site, *Uighur Online*, which calls for ethnic unity and exposes the

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social problems in Xinjiang, was blocked. In March, Tohti told the US-financed Radio Free Asia that the unemployment rates among the Uighurs were extremely high. He discovered in the 1990s when doing research for the Chinese government that there were 1.5 million unemployed Uighurs—out of a population of less than 9 million.

More than 100 prominent Chinese intellectuals have signed an open letter demanding to release Tohti and warning that his arrest would only deepen the ethnic tensions.

China and Russia are holding a joint "Peace Mission 2009" military exercise from July 22-26, involving 2,600 troops, tanks, armoured assault vehicles and fighters, aimed at countering separatism, extremism and terrorism in Central Asia. Its purpose is to intimidate the masses throughout the region. It is also a veiled warning to the US, which is intensifying its war in Afghanistan, not to meddle in China's and Russia's "backyards".

Xinjiang is now a trading hub for Chinese capital to penetrate deep into Central Asia and acquire energy resources and cotton that are vital for industry. The region's foreign trade is expected to increase 25 percent to $US27.8 billion this year, as exports of textiles and agricultural products to Russia, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian republics also grow.

The result is the blatant trampling on the democratic rights and culture of the indigenous Uighur population as a growing influx of Han immigrants combines with the propagation of naked capitalist relations in every aspect of life—from fast-food chains and share trading to beauty pageants. The impoverished farmers of the region have either come under the dominance of agricultural companies, or have been integrated into the working class as a new source of cheap labour.

The *Washington Post* on July 15 noted that Uighurs have been driven into the factories since 2002, not only by poverty, but also by police intimidation and threats of heavy fines. A textile factory owner in Hebei, Liu Guolin, told the newspaper that when he hired 143 girls from Xinjiang in 2007, they were accompanied by a policeman from their hometown who oversaw their daily life. "Without the policeman, I assume they would run away from the very beginning. I did not realise that until the local officials revealed it to me later. Only then did I learn most of those girls did not come voluntarily," Liu declared.

The Early Bright toy factory in Shaoguan city in Guangdong province also recruited 818 Uighur workers in May, as part of its 18,000-strong workforce. Initially, Han and Uighur workers tried to create a bond through joint activities such as nightly dances. But a rumour spread by a disgruntled Han worker that Uighurs had raped two female workers triggered a brawl, in which two Uighurs were killed, and ignited the July 5 protest in Urumqi.

The incident at the Early Bright factory was certainly fanned by the Chinese Communist Party's constant encouragement of reactionary Han chauvinism towards the country's ethnic minorities. It is also a symptom of deepening social tensions produced by the global economic crisis, which is causing huge job losses in export industries. Well aware that the Xinjiang unrest could lead to a wider movement of the Chinese working class, Western governments have maintained a collective silence in response to Beijing's police-state repression.

Commenting in *Forbes* this month, Gordon Chang, the author of *The Coming Collapse of China*, spelled out the concerns in Western capitals. "The Chinese regime can fail because, as we are seeing in Xinjiang, the Party is losing hearts and minds, and... a ruling organisation is vulnerable when that happens. In most other parts of China, ethnic tensions are not a factor, but the Communist Party has other problems. Almost nobody believes in its ideology, and everyone can see its failing as a ruling organisation. Outside of minority-inhabited areas, few actively oppose it, but few anywhere enthusiastically support it. The Party stays in place largely due to apathy, fear and a failure to imagine that China can be better."

Chang then warned: "There are tens of thousands of protests in China each year, and most of them have nothing to do with clashes between ethnicities. Mishandled like the one in Urumqi, however, almost any one of them can spread fast, from city to city and across vast regions." That is precisely what Western governments and major corporations fear will threaten their economic interests in China.

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