

# Ethnic tensions flare again in China's Xinjiang region

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Ethnic turmoil erupted again last week in China's northwestern region of Xinjiang, when thousands of Han Chinese took to the streets of the provincial capital city of Urumqi to demand the resignation of provincial Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary Wang Lequan over a series of syringe attacks, allegedly by minority Uighurs. Thousands of heavily armed troops again locked down the city. Five people were killed in the clashes. Two officials—Li Zhi, the CCP secretary of Urumqi and Zhu Changjie, the Xinjiang police chief—were sacked to appease the protesters.

The latest protests demonstrate that none of the underlying ethnic tensions has been resolved. On July 5 thousands of Uighurs led by students protested against the killing of two Uighur workers during a brutal brawl at a toy factory in Guangdong province in June. According to exile Uighur groups, the protests only turned into riots against Han Chinese individuals and businesses after demonstrators were provoked by police. The official death toll was 197, mainly Han Chinese. An unknown number of Uighur protesters were killed by the security forces. In addition, 825 people were detained and 196 formally charged over the riots.

Last week's protests followed syringe stabbings in Urumqi that have raised fears of HIV and other infections. The media has reported that over 530 people had been injured since mid-August, mainly Han Chinese, but also Hui, Uighur and other ethnic minorities. Whoever was responsible, the attacks have only inflamed ethnic hatred and played directly into the hands of the Beijing regime and Han chauvinists, who are now demanding a police crackdown against Uighurs in the city.

The Xinhua news agency reported that more than 1,000 Han residents protested outside the provincial CCP

headquarters last Thursday to demand government protection. Other estimates put the crowd at around 10,000-20,000 people. A Han woman named Liu told Agence France Presse: "People are getting stabbed just walking down the streets by other passers-by. They are Uighurs who are doing the stabbing."

The crowd chanted slogans demanding that Xinjiang CCP secretary Wang step down. Some even demanded his execution. Wang attempted to disperse the crowd by urging them to go home but failed. Clashes between riot police and protestors killed five people and injured 14 more.

Thousands of paramilitary police officers with assault rifles backed by armoured personnel carriers and trucks were deployed and shut all major roads into Urumqi. All schools were shut down and a night curfew was imposed. Despite heavy security measures, smaller protests continued on Friday, while three Hong Kong reporters were beaten and detained by the police. The "calm" only returned last weekend. Urumqi police and prosecutors issued a public warning on September 6 threatening heavy penalties including the death sentence for those involved in syringe attacks. They also declared that anyone spreading rumours that led to "mass disorders" would face up to five years in jail.

So far three men and one woman, all Uighurs, have been arrested for allegedly carrying out the needle attacks. Although the Chinese authorities have insisted none of the victims is at risk of HIV and other diseases, fears remain as doctors monitor patients for any signs of infection.

The CCP regime immediately blamed the attacks on "separatists" and "terrorists," as it did following the July riot, without providing any evidence. Public Security

Minister Meng Jianzhu blamed “saboteurs” from separatist groups, such as the exile World Uighur Congress, for the attacks. “The needle-stabbing attacks of recent days were a continuation of July 5. Their goal is to wreck ethnic unity and create splits in the motherland,” he declared.

Beijing is particularly concerned to suppress any protests that could disrupt the CCP’s celebration on October 1 of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1949 revolution and has imposed a nationwide security crackdown.

Isolated syringe attacks by HIV patients have previously been reported in China, often reflecting rage and frustration at the government’s failure to prevent the disease and official discrimination against HIV/AIDS victims. Xinjiang has the highest HIV infection rate in China (25,000 new cases in 2008)—another symptom of a social breakdown that has led to widespread drug addiction and prostitution.

The roots of the ethnic tensions in Xinjiang lie in the country’s deepening social crisis, the promotion of Han Chinese chauvinism by the CCP regime and its anti-democratic police-state methods. The Uighur population has suffered social deprivation and systematic discrimination. Many have been forced by authorities to leave the province to labour in the sweatshops in the eastern coastal provinces.

Although Xinjiang is experiencing an energy boom, working people—Uighur and Han Chinese alike—are receiving none of the benefits. “In Xinjiang, natural gas is in short supply. In Aksu, midway between Urumqi and Kashgar, buses, taxis and private cars queue for half a kilometre in front of a natural gas station almost every day. Petrol and gas prices in the region are among the highest in all of China. And homes in most parts of Xinjiang, except for the biggest cities, burn coal or wood for heating because of the region’s natural gas is sold to other provinces,” the *Financial Times* noted.

Han Chinese who have been encouraged to migrate to Xinjiang are facing economic difficulties. According to the *Financial Times*, Han protesters were also complaining about the weak economy and demanding government financial assistance. “Shop owners were desperate because tourists had stayed away and consumption had dropped since the July riots,” the article

stated.

Chinese authorities are deeply concerned that unrest in Xinjiang could trigger broader social upheavals. Protests and strikes by workers, farmers and students are intensifying, due to rising unemployment and poverty.

On September 1-2, more than 1,000 female workers at the Weikang Medical Products factory in Shenzhen stopped work over long hours and pay cuts. The local government sent dozens of paramilitary police to disperse the protest, injuring two workers. The company is a subsidiary of the transnational giant Philips and manufactures medical equipment.

Beijing was particularly shocked by the demands of protesters in Urumqi for the resignation of provincial CCP secretary Wang, who is a protégé of President Hu Jintao and a member of the powerful CCP Politburo. Wang has been in charge of Xinjiang for 14 years, an unusually long time in China’s system of provincial appointments.

The *Washington Post* reported rumours in Urumqi that Wang was finished politically as he had not appeared on state television since the protests began. Because of his seniority, Wang can only be removed through a vote in the CCP Central Committee. As the newspaper noted, such a decision would reverberate throughout the CCP bureaucracy. “Removing an official as senior as Wang could send a signal beyond Xinjiang that the Chinese people have the power to expel officials,” it stated.

Such considerations were undoubtedly behind the decision to sacrifice two lesser officials—the provincial police chief and Urumqi CCP boss Li Zhi, who was replaced by Zhu Hailun, the head of Xinjiang’s Law and Order Commission. The appointment makes clear that the CCP regime, which is responsible for the economic and social crisis that has produced the ethnic tensions and unrest, has only one answer—brute force and police repression.



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