

# Heavy Chinese police presence after Mongolian protests

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The Chinese government has reacted nervously to unrest in the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia over the past week. Martial law-style measures have been imposed in major centres—Hohhot, Tongliao, Chifeng and Dongsheng—after protests erupted, initially over the death of a cattle herder who was run over by a coal truck on May 11.

The incident occurred in West Ujimqin Banner (the equivalent of a county). A herder, Mergen, led a group of 40 men who sought to block a convoy of coal trucks. The herders had been protesting since late April because the vehicles were taking a short-cut across grazing land, killing their stock. A 100-tonne coal hauler reportedly crushed Mergen's head under its wheels and dragged his body for 150 metres.

Internet blogs said one of drivers had declared that “my truck is fully insured, and the life of a smelly Mongolian herder costs me no more than 40,000 yuan [\$US8,000].”

On May 15, a group of 20 residents in the Abag Banner, complaining about noise, dust and water pollution caused by a mine run by Pingan Mining, smashed windows at the mine's office. After police intervened, the protestors disrupted operations at the mine site. During the second clash, 20-year-old Yan Wenlong was struck in the head and killed by a forklift.

These deaths triggered protests across Inner Mongolia against rapidly expanding mining operations and Han chauvinism against ethnic Mongolians. A wave of migration into the region has transformed the six million ethnic Mongolians into a minority in the region's population of 24 million. The discontent exploded in a similar way to that in Tibet during 2008 and Xinjiang in 2009.

According to the Hong Kong-based *Apple Daily*, the protests started with a demonstration on May 23 by Mergen's family and hundreds of herders in front of the

West Ujimqin Banner administration office. Several people were arrested. Calls for broader action were initiated online. The following day, 2,000 students and herders staged a protest outside the headquarters of the Xilinhot city government—which administers West Ujimqin Banner and Abag Banner. Over the next two days, smaller protests erupted in other districts, prompting Inner Mongolia Communist Party secretary Hu Chunghua to visit a high school to placate students.

Hu, a close ally of President Hu Jintao, told teachers and students on May 27 that recent incidents had “triggered a great deal of public anger.” He pleaded: “Teachers and students, please rest assured that the suspects will be punished severely and quickly, in accordance with legal procedures, to resolutely safeguard the dignity of the law and the rights of the victims and their families.” Deputy party secretary Ren Yaping was shown on television the next day calling for the “severe punishment” of the perpetrators of the May 11 incident. He presented Mergen's family with what appeared to be a large bundle of cash as compensation.

These public relations exercises failed to quell the unrest, however. The US-based Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Centre reported that last Friday 300 riot police attacked hundreds of protesting herders and students in Shuluun Huh Banner.

In part, the authorities feared that online calls for a region-wide protest on Monday, the Memorial Day of Mongolian Historic Heroes (such as Genghis Khan), would fuel separatist demands for the region to join the Republic of Mongolia to the north.

The regime has deployed armoured vehicles and heavily-armed paramilitary police in major towns. Riot police have been sent to some university campuses. Internet access has been restricted, on the pretext of conducting “anti-terrorism” exercises. The police have sent text messages to residents

warning them not to participate in “illegal gatherings.”

A resident of Hohhot, where protests had occurred, told Agence France Presse (AFP) on Monday that “there are still many police patrolling near the government building, one every several metres.” A hotel employee near the city’s Xinhua Square said all roads to his building had been blocked by security officers since Sunday morning, “because police want to prevent students from gathering at the square and making trouble.”

Schools and campuses have been instructed to keep students in line. A teacher at the Inner Mongolia Technical College of Construction in Hohhot told the Associated Press on Tuesday that Communist Party officials now required the college to report daily to the authorities and to head off any trouble among its 7,000 students. He said students and teachers alike had been confined to the campus. “The leaders and we teachers go around the students’ dormitories at night to make sure that everybody’s there.”

According to the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* on Tuesday, security was also tight in Xilinhot, 500 kilometres northwest of Hohhot. A local businessman said the main street had been sealed off by troops, and he saw more than 20 military vehicles carrying troops leaving a barracks that morning.

To placate ethnic Mongolians, the Chinese regime is seeking to make scapegoats of the three drivers allegedly involved in the initial incidents. On Monday, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported that the Xilinhot Intermediate People’s Court would try the forklift operator involved in the May 15 incident for homicide. The next day, a local government chief declared at a press conference that the two drivers involved in the May 11 killing, had been arrested.

Beijing is acutely aware that unrest among China’s national minorities is always a sign of deeper and broader social tensions. On Monday, the Chinese Communist Party Politburo held a meeting chaired by President Hu to discuss how to control the situation in Inner Mongolia.

According to Xinhua, Hu and other senior leaders said China was “in a period of prominent social contradictions, [making] the task of social management all the more arduous.” Failure in this task would “affect the party’s ruling status, the country’s long-term stability and the people’s prosperity.”

In reality, the country’s immense social contradictions

flow directly from the nature of the Stalinist regime and its capitalist program. The ethnic tensions in Inner Mongolia have been produced by the region’s new role as the “energy base” for China’s hothouse economy.

Hundreds of coal mines have opened up in recent years. In 2010, Inner Mongolia became the largest coal-producing region, with an annual output exceeding 700 million tonnes—greater than the combined output of Australia and South Africa in 2009. Inner Mongolia has coal reserves estimated at 732 billion tonnes. In the Xilingol area, coal production rose nearly 50 percent last year, and is expected to reach 200 million tonnes by 2015.

Just as the mining companies are notorious for neglecting the basic safety, resulting in the deaths of thousands of miners every year, they have no regard for the livelihoods of the local herders. A herder in Xilinhot told the *South China Morning Post* on Wednesday that coal mining over the past two years had badly damaged the grasslands, causing pollution and sandstorms. Another former herder explained that “huge benefits” of mining had not benefited the herders. “This is similar to protests sparked by forced demolitions [elsewhere in China]—the victims will eventually find the situation unbearable and will make their voices heard,” he said.

Mongolian herders, who are among the poorest social layers in China, are being impacted by market forces. China’s dairy giants (the two biggest are based in Inner Mongolia), in partnership with major Western corporations, operated on the basis of large-scale, industrialised production. Herders are now subject to these companies. Many no longer own animals but tend livestock for better-off households. Others have been forced to become wage labourers.

The protests in Inner Mongolia are another sign that China is heading into a period of social turmoil and class conflict, driven by the deepening world economic crisis and growing social inequality.



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