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China: Halt death sentences against Uighurs

China's supreme court must carefully review reported death sentences imposed today on five individuals by a court in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of northwest China.

Thirteen people were sentenced by the court in the city of Urumqi, in connection with deadly violence that erupted after a police crackdown on Uighur protesters on 5 July.

Five of these were sentenced to death, and another two were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Tomorrow another five cases are due to be tried in connection with the unrest.

"We urge the Court to ensure that the defendants who are to be tried tomorrow receive a fair trial, legal counsel of their choice and are not subject to the death penalty," said Roseann Rife, Amnesty International's Deputy Asia Pacific Director.

According to Chinese official reports, almost 200 people were killed during the disturbances in July.

The demonstrators were protesting the authorities' failure to take action following the deaths of at least two, but possibly several dozen, Uighur migrant workers during a riot at a toy factory in the city of Shaoguan, in the southern province of Guangdong.

Nine people were executed last month in connection with the unrest.

Amnesty International has raised concerns about the lack of openness and transparency of the trials and believes defendants have been denied the right to choose their legal representation.

Judicial authorities in Beijing put pressure on human rights lawyers not to take up the cases of the accused.

Since the July unrest in the XUAR the authorities have detained thousands of people, brought dozens to trial, and threatened those involved in the unrest with harsh sentences.

"Last month's executions followed fast on the heels of the sentences from the Intermediate Court, calling into question the care with which the Supreme Court reviewed these cases," said Rife. "Amnesty International opposes the death penalty in all cases, but the lack of transparency and fair trials in these cases is outrageous."

Chinese authorities have refused to allow any independent inquiry into the violence.

Internet connections, international telephone links, and other forms of communication in the XUAR that were shut down on the evening of the 5 July, remain blocked, making information regarding the events of July and after extremely difficult to obtain.

According to Chinese law, all death sentences must be reviewed by the Chinese Supreme People's Court.