

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 17/011/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 024
4 February 2003

People's Republic of China: No justice for the victims of the 1997 crackdown in Gulja (Yining)

Dozens of people were killed or injured when the Chinese security forces reportedly opened fire on ethnic Uighur demonstrators in Gulja (Yining) City, on 5 and 6 February 1997. The initially peaceful demonstration on 5 February was followed by several days of sporadic rioting in which both civilians and members of the security forces were killed or injured. Thousands of people were detained as the security forces went systematically through the streets, arresting suspected protestors and supporters, including their relatives. Many of those detained were reportedly tortured.

Today, on the eve of the sixth anniversary of the demonstration, Amnesty International has written to Ismail Tiliwaldi, the newly-appointed Chair of the XUAR Regional Government, calling for an independent inquiry into allegations of serious human rights violations that took place during and after the demonstration and requesting further information about those who remain in prison.

"We fear that many have been imprisoned in violation of their fundamental human rights or after unfair trials," Amnesty International said, adding that it had records of 20 people thought to remain in prison, but believed the total to be much higher.

"In the interests of transparency, the authorities must make public details of the whereabouts of those detained together with their current legal status and the charges against them," the international human rights organization continued. "It must also address other serious human rights abuses perpetrated during the crackdown on the protestors."

A group of several hundred-protestors were reportedly hosed down with icy water after being detained in an open public space on 5 February. Many contracted severe frostbite as a result and had to have limbs amputated. At least two people detained in connection with the demonstration later died in custody, apparently as a result of torture.

No independent investigation is known to have taken place into these or other allegations of serious human rights abuses perpetrated during that time.

"Six years on, the victims of these tragic events continue to be denied justice," Amnesty International said. "Impunity for those who perpetrated serious human rights violations will only fan the flames of further unrest and instability in the region."

The Chinese authorities have since claimed that the demonstration and rioting was organised by "terrorists", but have failed to provide any evidence to substantiate these claims. Eyewitness accounts indicate that the demonstrators were local people and that the rioting was mainly provoked by the brutality of the security forces.

"In the absence of any reliable or credible evidence of 'terrorist' involvement in these protests, this appears to be yet another example of the authorities using the subjective yardstick of 'terrorism' to justify repression and serious human rights violations against people attempting to exercise their fundamental human rights in the XUAR," Amnesty International stressed.

Background

The demonstration of 5 February 1997 was organised in response to increased repression, including a clampdown on traditional Uighur cultural and religious activities in and around Gulja over previous years. This included the banning of "meshreps" - a traditional form of social gathering revived by Uighurs in Gulja in 1994 - and of a local Uighur football league as well as the closure of independent religious schools. Arbitrary arrests of Uighurs, including local community and religious leaders, increased over the following months exacerbating local tension and discontent.

Hundreds of local people took part in the 5 February demonstration shouting religious slogans and calling for equal treatment of Uighurs. According to eyewitness, demonstrators were unarmed.

The security forces used tear gas and water cannon to break up the demonstration and violent clashes occurred as news spread and more people came out into the streets in various parts of the city. Some police officers reportedly opened fire into the crowd. Dozens are believed to have been killed or injured, but the total number of casualties remains unknown. Thousands of residents were detained during the two weeks which followed the protests and many of them were reportedly tortured. Some remained in custody for months on end without charge.

Eyewitness reported that many of those detained during and after the protests were treated with extreme brutality. For example, a group of 300-400 demonstrators, including some children, arrested on 5 February 1997, were reportedly detained in a public place, identified by some as a sports stadium, where they were hosed down with icy water and kept in the open air wet for two hours in the freezing February temperatures. Many of them suffered severe frostbite and some allegedly had to have feet, fingers or hands amputated.

At least two people died in custody, apparently as a result of torture, after being arrested in connection with the Gulja demonstration. To Amnesty International's knowledge, there has been no independent inquiry into their deaths:

Salam Kari, a young man from Gulja, who had formed a Uighur football team in the city in the mid-1990s, was arrested in May 1997 in connection with the February protests. A few days later he was dead. His body, which was returned to his family, reportedly showed marks of torture. The police reportedly claimed that he had committed suicide in prison.

Abdulhelil, a 28-year old businessman and founder of the 'meshreps', died in custody on 17 October 2000, apparently as a result of repeated beatings and other forms of torture. He had been detained on 5 February 1997 and accused of being a leader of the demonstration that day. He was reportedly denied access to his family following his arrest. After his death, his body was reportedly buried in a shallow grave under heavy police guard. The authorities initially denied his death, but later claimed that he died of a heart failure after contracting a respiratory inflammation and myocarditis in prison.

Those who are believed to remain in prison include:

Ablat Patar, a surgeon from Gulja military hospital, reportedly detained in early July 1998 and accused of giving medical treatment to "nationalist separatists", including people injured during the 1997 Gulja incident. Unofficial sources suggest that he may be held in Yengi Hayat Prison in Gulja. Further details about his conviction or his current legal status remain unknown.

Iminjan, a 28-year-old teacher, reportedly detained during the February 1997 protests and tortured in detention. This included being made to stand barefoot in the snow and having cold water poured on him, causing severe frostbite of both feet. He was reportedly accused of 'illegal religious activities' and sentenced to ten years in prison in a secret trial in March or April 1998. His current whereabouts are unknown.

Kasim Haji, Hamit Mejit and Shevket Sakhal (or Shevket Tursun), three businessmen arrested in March or April 1997 for allegedly passing information about the February protests to a group of foreign journalists. Unconfirmed reports suggest they were subsequently sentenced to 15 or 18 years in prison, but their current whereabouts are unknown.

In an official report, published in the People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao*) on 21 January 2002, the Chinese authorities described the 5 February incident and its aftermath as a "serious riot" organised by the "East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah". During a press conference on 12 September 2002, Kong Quan, a spokesperson from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated that this was another name for the "East Turkestan Islamic Movement" (ETIM). ETIM had been listed as a "terrorist organisation" by the UN Security Council the day before after intense lobbying from China.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>