

China: Extensive crackdown on Uighurs to counter "terrorism" must stop

Since September 11, the Chinese government has stepped up its harsh repression of ethnic Uighur opponents of Chinese rule and others branded as "separatists" in the name of countering "terrorism", Amnesty International said today in a new report.

The report describes new anti-terrorism provisions in Chinese law and the crackdown against "terrorist, separatist and illegal religious activities" currently underway in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

"The Chinese government has claimed that 'ethnic separatists' are linked with international 'terrorists' and has called for international support for its crackdown. However the subjective yardstick of 'terrorism' has been used to detain a broad range of people, some of whom may have done little more than practice their religion or defend their culture," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International is calling on the international community to use the opportunity of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva to urge the Chinese authorities not justify human rights violations in the name of the "war against terrorism".

Although hardly any "terrorist" acts have been committed in the XUAR over the past few years, the authorities have detained thousands of people over the last six months, and imposed new restrictions on freedom of religion and cultural rights. Some people have been sentenced to long prison terms and others have been executed.

The Islamic clergy has been subjected to heavy scrutiny and "political education." According to official sources, by the end of last

year, 8000 imams had been "trained" to give them "a clearer understanding of the party's ethnic and religious policies". Some Muslim clerics have been detained for teaching the Koran.

Fasting during the holy month of Ramadan was banned in schools, hospitals and government offices. One teacher in Khotan said that students might face expulsion if they refused to break the fast. Mosques have been closed down because they were located near schools and deemed to be a "bad influence" on young people.

Earlier this year the crackdown was expanded to include other sectors of society. "Study classes" for key personnel in literature and art, the media, cultural management, social science research and other fields have been introduced. "All potential dissent and opposition activities, including peaceful expression of views via poems, songs, books, pamphlets, letters or the Internet have been targeted," Amnesty International said.

There have been a number of reports that "separatists" have been sentenced at "public sentencing meetings". Some were reportedly sentenced to death and executed immediately after the meetings. Amnesty International's report cites several cases, including one on 15 October 2001 where 12 Uighurs received sentences ranging from five years imprisonment to death. Two people were executed immediately after the rally.

Amnesty International's report also details recent amendments to the Criminal Law. The new provisions enlarge the scope of the application of the death penalty and may criminalise peaceful activities, freedom of expression and association. The law makes it a criminal offence to be a member of a "terrorist organization" but as there is no definition for such an organization, the law could be interpreted as referring to political opposition or religious groups.

Amnesty International's report makes several recommendations, calling on the Chinese government to end the extensive human rights violations resulting from the current political crackdown in the XUAR. It also calls on governments to refrain from returning to China anyone who is allegedly associated with any radical Islamist movement. Such individuals are likely to face torture or the death penalty on their return.

Background

In the continuous political crackdown in the XUAR over the past ten years, the authorities have detained tens of thousands of people, held many of them in complete secrecy, preventing all independent investigation into the cases, while periodically releasing selective information about a few of those who have been prosecuted. Many of those prosecuted have been held incommunicado for months on end, subjected to torture, and sentenced after grossly unfair trials, most of these either held in secret or in front of large crowds during "mass sentencing rallies". In this context, there are reasons to doubt the credibility of the government's information about those it accuses of involvement in "terrorist" activity.

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