

AI Index: PRE 01/324/2012
04 July 2012

Urumqi Riots three years on - crackdown on Uighurs grows bolder

Three years on from riots and mass arrests in China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Chinese authorities continue to silence those speaking out on abuses during and in the wake of the unrest, Amnesty International said.

New testimony reveals that dozens, if not hundreds, of the Uighur ethnic minority, many of whom were arrested in the wake of the riots, are still disappeared, and that the government continues to intimidate people - including families seeking information on their disappeared relatives - who reveal human rights abuses during and after the protests.

Of 20 Uighurs forcibly returned to China from Cambodia in December 2009 in connection with July 5, five are reported to have been sentenced to life, and eight to prison terms ranging from 16-20 years.

"Three years on, the government is still silencing people who speak out about July 2009," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Director.

"The general trend toward repression that we see all over China is particularly pronounced in the XUAR.

"Chinese authorities must reveal the whereabouts of those individuals subject to enforced disappearance, and end the persecution of their family members seeking answers."

On 5 July 2009 a protest in the regional capital Urumqi against perceived Chinese government inaction over the death of a Uighur factory worker in southern China, turned to ethnic rioting following police violence against demonstrators.

While the demonstration started peacefully, rioting erupted following police use of violence against protesters. According to official figures, 197 died in the ensuing violence, most of them Han Chinese.

Eye witness accounts gathered by Amnesty International following the unrest cast doubt over the official version of events and point to unnecessary or excessive use of force by police against Uighur protesters, including beatings, use of tear gas and shooting directly into crowds.

Mass arrests followed the disturbances, with house to house searches resulting in the arbitrary detention of hundreds if not thousands of people, and numerous reports of enforced disappearances, torture and ill-treatment of Uighurs in detention.

Families seeking information about missing relatives have been intimidated, detained and threatened by the authorities in an effort to stop them petitioning and searching for loved ones.

Over the last month, dozens of Uighur families have come out publicly with stories of family members

disappeared since July 2009, the youngest aged only 16 at the time of his detention. They include families from Urumqi, Kashgar, and Hotan Prefecture in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

Only 19 of these families have allowed their names to be made public. All fear retaliation by the authorities.

“These brave families are just a small portion of those with disappeared relatives,” said Baber.

Patigul Eli, the mother of one of the disappeared, Imammemet Eli, said she had met at least 30 other families in front of police and government buildings in Urumqi also trying to get information from the authorities about disappeared relatives.

Wang Mingshan, the chief of the Urumqi Public Security Department, is reported to have said he had received 300 requests from families for help in locating relatives.

According to one family member, there are more than two hundred families in one county in Hotan prefecture alone with disappeared relatives. Many are afraid to come forward for fear of retribution by the authorities.

Ethnic Uighur asylum seekers forcibly returned to China are at risk of serious human rights violations.

“Ethnic Uighurs forcibly returned to China may face enforced disappearance or torture,” said Baber.

“Chinese authorities routinely blame unrest in Xinjiang on overseas groups of Uighurs – returning them to China where they may face serious abuse is in clear violation of international human rights law.”

Notes to Editors

To arrange interview or for more information please contact press officer Katya Nasim:
katya.nasim@amnesty.org + 44 207 413 5871 / +44 7904398103