

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Long-standing Uighur grievances behind repeated protests must be addressed**

February 5 marks the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a violent crackdown on peaceful Uighur protesters by security forces in the city of Gulja (In Chinese: Yining), in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in China's far-West. On 5 February 1997 dozens of people were killed or injured in Gulja when security forces opened fire on Uighur protesters. The Uighurs had begun a peaceful protest against the banning of "meshreps", a traditional Uighur form of social gathering, the closing of a Uighur football league, high unemployment among Uighurs, and the closure of religious schools. Many dozens were killed and injured, and potentially hundreds in the ensuing days according to unconfirmed reports. In the government crackdown, thousands were detained, many hundreds disappeared, and there were reports of executions after unfair trials.

Security forces cracked down violently again on 5 July 2009 when Uighurs in Urumqi began a peaceful protest, this time about perceived government inaction over beatings and killing of Uighur migrant workers by Han Chinese in Shaoguan, in the southern province of Guangdong, in June 2009. Violent clashes between ethnic groups and Han Chinese ensued, leading to hundreds of deaths. In the crackdown that followed, as in Gulja, thousands were detained, hundreds imprisoned, and dozens sentenced to death and executed after unfair trials.

The government has refused to allow an independent investigation into either incident and in particular the use of lethal force against initially peaceful protests. No member of the security forces is known to have been investigated or prosecuted.

These anniversaries mark another year of government repression and failure to address legitimate Uighur grievances. Rather than achieving the stated goal of bringing about a "harmonious" society, this strategy has only intensified inter-ethnic tensions.

#### **Severe violations of civil and political rights**

Year on year, the government pursues policies which severely violate Uighurs' civil and political rights. They routinely associate unofficial Uighur cultural activities, religious practice and expressions of dissent with the "three forces" of "terrorism, separatism and religious extremism". Many Uighurs have been arbitrarily detained and imprisoned on charges of "splittism" or "inciting separatism" for exercising their right to freedom of expression, association and religion including their right to enjoy and develop their culture. Particularly severe punishments are imposed on those who communicate information considered sensitive about the conditions of Uighurs in the XUAR to sources outside China. Individuals charged with such crimes are denied justice: they do not enjoy fair and open trials; they are denied legal counsel of their choice; they are kept in long-term detention without charge; their families are often not informed of their whereabouts; and they suffer torture and ill-treatment in detention.

Memetjan Abdulla, a broadcaster and editor for eight years with the Uighur service of China National Radio, was sentenced to life imprisonment in a closed trial in April 2010. His "crime" was to have translated into Uighur and posted on the Uighur website Salkin a call by the overseas World Uyghur Congress for Uighur exiles to protest the beatings and killings of Uighurs in Shaoguan, Guangdong Province, in June 2009. Abdulla, in his 30s, had also answered questions from foreign

journalists in Beijing about Uighur reactions to the beatings and killings. An anonymous source who attended the trial reported that official anger at Memetjan Abulla's actions contributed to the particularly harsh sentence. Severe punishments of such communications help to keep the XUAR behind a virtual information blockade – with only government information and interpretation of events being systematically circulated.

Suppression of Uighurs' right to practice their religion is among the harshest in China. According to new regulations issued in December 2009, no organization or individual may “lure or force minors to participate in religious activities”, although what constitutes such activities is not clearly defined. For the first time such regulations specify the role of public security forces in carrying out administrative punishment, including detention, for those who violate the regulations. Parents may thus risk a fine or detention if they provide religious education to their children or allow them to attend mosque.

Uighur students have reported to Amnesty International that they risk being expelled from school if they are caught going to a mosque. Civil servants in the XUAR, including teachers, policemen, and other government employees, are also prohibited from practicing their religion, at the risk of losing their employment and criminal prosecution.

### **Ongoing violations of economic, social and cultural rights**

Uighurs continue to suffer violations of their economic, social and cultural rights. Job recruitment advertisements published on XUAR government websites have reserved positions for Han Chinese in civil servant posts, state-owned enterprises, and private enterprises. This indicates direct government involvement in discriminatory hiring practices, as well as their implicit endorsement and failure to prevent discrimination by private employers. Such discrimination has led to intense resentment. Even Uighurs educated in Chinese universities in Eastern China and who are fluent in Mandarin Chinese report employment discrimination based on their ethnicity.

Uighurs have reported to Amnesty International that employment discrimination against them has worsened in recent years, fuelled in part by the influx of Han Chinese migrants into the region and the policy of “bilingual education”, which has in practice pushed Mandarin Chinese as the dominant language of instruction in schools, within the judicial system and other realms of public life at the expense of the Uighur language. This policy has fuelled resentment on the part of Uighurs from all walks of life. Many Uighurs have expressed to Amnesty International that they perceive the loss of their language as one of the greatest threats to Uighur culture and identity. Many tell of Uighur relatives and friends, particularly teachers, who have lost their jobs as a result of the policy, on the grounds that they do not have the requisite level of Mandarin Chinese. According to one young Uighur woman,

“If it continues this way, with Uighur teachers being fired and no Uighur being allowed to be spoken in class, then there won't be any Uighur language, and then there won't be any Uighur people.”

In a region in which ethnic groups constitute around 60% of the population, of which Uighurs are the large majority, the government must respect and protect the rights of Uighurs and other ethnic groups to enjoy their own culture, to practice their religion, and to use their own language, in accordance with international human rights law and standards.

For 30 years, after the launching of economic reforms in the late 1970s, the XUAR region fell economically behind the rest of the nation, ranking among the poorest regions, despite being richly endowed in natural resources such as oil and natural gas. In May 2010, acknowledging the backward state of the XUAR economy, and the link between economic development, social stability and ethnic unity, the government announced a large-scale investment program, with promises of raising incomes to the national average by 2015. For such development plans to address the underlying grievances of ethnic groups the government will need to promote debate and actively solicit the views of these groups in their formulation and implementation and ensure that any

resulting economic benefits are enjoyed equally by all ethnic groups. Furthermore, discrimination in the economic realm, including in employment, land ownership and access to business opportunities, must be seriously addressed in the implementation of any development plan.

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