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China: New testimonies reinforce call for Xinjiang riot investigation

Amnesty International is urging the Chinese government to launch an independent investigation into last year's riots in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, after new testimony obtained by the organisation has cast further doubt on the official version of events.

A report released today, entitled "*Justice, justice: The July 2009 Protests in Xinjiang, China*" includes newly gathered testimonies from Uighurs who fled China after the unrest, which centred on Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi.

Interviewees described unnecessary or excessive use of force, mass arrests, enforced disappearances, and torture and ill-treatment in detention that occurred on 5 July 2009 and during the ensuing government crackdown.

"The official account leaves too many questions unanswered. How many people really died, who killed them, how did it happen, and why?" said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

Ahead of the 5 July anniversary, security in Xinjiang has been tightened, with reports of restrictions on freedom of movement and expression, and on Uighur community organisations.

"Instead of stifling inquiry, blaming outside agitators and generating fear, the Chinese government should use the anniversary to launch a proper investigation, including into the Uighur community's long-simmering grievances that contributed to the unrest" said Catherine Baber.

Eyewitnesses to the 5 July events confirmed that the protest against government inaction in the face of killings of Uighur factory workers in southern China started peacefully, but was met with violence by security forces. One 29-year-old woman from Urumqi said:

"...some 20 military vehicles arrived. The security forces carried automatic rifles and started to push the demonstrators. The woman walked towards them. A policeman shot her. She died. It was shocking, and I was very frightened. Everything then became chaotic."

Rioting erupted later in the evening, particularly in the southern, Uighur, part of the city, resulting in numerous deaths and injuries. Chinese officials said that 197 people died in the violence on 5 July. Of the killed, 156 were described as "innocent people" who included 134 ethnic Han Chinese, 11 Hui, 10 Uighurs and one Manchurian.

A 22 year-old male eyewitness described the chaos and violence in Urumqi:

“At about 8pm [on 5 July], a group of Uighurs went past our house towards the south, smashing cars and other property. Then, about 30 minutes later there was another group of Uighurs. They were running, the army was behind them. The army shot at them as they fled, in the back. I think maybe three of them died, they were shot in the back.”

“It’s unclear whether authorities were adequately prepared to protect all citizens, and whether they had the right training and equipment to control the situation without resorting to lethal force,” said Catherine Baber.

Violent attacks were reported in the city throughout the week, with eyewitnesses reporting to Amnesty International that in some cases police failed to protect Uighurs attacked by Han Chinese on 7 July.

China has recently approved a development package for Xinjiang to promote social stability, but Amnesty International is urging the government to deliver both equity and justice in Xinjiang, and ensure broad community consultation in all future planning and implementation.

“The Chinese government hopes to stabilise Xinjiang by directing money at the problem, but without a credible independent investigation of the Urumqi riots and underlying grievances, resentment and mistrust will continue,” said Catherine Baber.

Over a thousand people were detained in the aftermath of the unrest and possibly hundreds subjected to enforced disappearances. According to official statistics, at least 198 people have been sentenced, following trials that Amnesty International considers to have fallen short of international fair trial standards. Nine people are known to have been executed and at least 26 more sentenced to death.

Amnesty International is calling on China to set up an independent and impartial inquiry into the human rights abuses committed by all participants in the Urumqi unrest, and to ensure a transparent judicial process for all those facing charges linked to the unrest, including fair trials in accordance with international standards.

Background

On 5 July 2009, violence erupted in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) in northwest China, following a police crackdown on a peaceful demonstration over government inaction following killings of migrant Uighur factory workers in Guangdong, southern China. The protests took place against a back-drop of Uighur resentment, built-up over years of official repression and discrimination.

Several UN Special Rapporteurs, including the Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Independent Expert on Minority Rights, have asked to visit the XUAR. To date, the Chinese authorities have not granted their request.