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CHINA: HUNDREDS DETAINED AFTER ETHNIC RIOTS IN XINJIANG

Following violent ethnic riots in the predominantly Muslim region of Xinjiang last week, Amnesty International fears for the safety of those detained and is calling on the Chinese authorities to ensure that no prisoner is executed or subjected to torture.

“The Chinese authorities should refrain from carrying out executions and immediately stop arbitrary arrests in the region, where a crackdown on suspected nationalists and members of unapproved Muslim religious groups has been underway since last year,” Amnesty International said today.

Information about the violent unrest in Yining on 5 and 6 February is still scant, with conflicting reports about the extent of the casualties and the number of arrests carried out. The protests, which turned into riots, reportedly involved more than 1000 ethnic Uighurs calling for independence from China.

No official account of the protests has yet been issued, though official sources have reported that nine people were killed and nearly 200 injured during the riots. Press reports have cited local officials as giving different figures, varying from 200 to 500, for the number of people detained during and after the unrest.

Unofficial sources claim that the death toll is much higher and that well over 1,000 people were detained. Some local residents have claimed that summary executions were carried out immediately after the rioting, but these reports remain unconfirmed. In the absence of independent observers in the city, which was sealed off after the riots, such claims cannot be confirmed.

One of those detained has been named as Abdul Halil (Abudu Heilili), a 29 year-old unemployed Uighur man who, according to official sources, had taken part in another demonstration in Yining in August 1995. According to the authorities, he is being held in police custody for interrogation. No other information has been issued so far about those detained in connection with the unrest.

According to exiled opposition groups, the riots in Yining were provoked by the recent execution of 30 Muslim nationalists and growing restrictions on religious freedom. One source cited local residents as saying that unrest had gradually built up after an incident in the Ayden sub-district of Yining on 27 January 1997, in which several officers from the People's Armed Police reportedly roughly dispersed a group of 15 Muslim women who had gone to the local Mosque to pray. A violent fight with angry local residents reportedly followed and, as the news spread, further incidents occurred in the following days, the source said.

Other exile sources have claimed that the unrest was triggered by the execution on 31 January this year of 30 young Uighurs reportedly accused of openly agitating against government officials. They were reportedly paraded in trucks through the streets of Yining before being executed. Official sources have denied the report. The last officially reported executions in Xinjiang were those of 16 men, including one Uighur accused of terrorist activities, who were executed in Urumqi on 30 January 1997.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to account for all those detained in connection with the recent riots in Yining and to promptly release all those who have not been charged with a recognizably criminal offence in accordance with international standards. The authorities should also take measures to ensure that detainees are not subjected to torture or ill-treatment, and that they are granted access to lawyers, and a fair and public trial reflecting the spirit of the amendments made last year to the Chinese Criminal Procedure Law to introduce a fairer judicial process.

Amnesty International does not condone violence and recognizes the right of governments to punish people involved in criminal and violent activities, but it believes that this rule should apply equally to people in position of authority and that all prisoners should be treated fairly and humanely in accordance with international standards.

Background

A high number of executions have been carried out in Xinjiang, as elsewhere in China, since the start last year of the “strike hard” anti-crime campaign, which has led to several thousand summary executions across China. In Xinjiang, a crackdown on suspected Muslim nationalists -- termed “separatists” -- was carried out in parallel to the anti-crime campaign, and those executed have included nationalists accused of involvement in terrorist activities. Others were imprisoned for peacefully expressing their views, such as Abduvahit Ahmedi, an ethnic Uighur who was sentenced in May 1996 to three years’ imprisonment by a court in Urumqi for writing “reactionary” material “seeking to split the motherland”.

A major crackdown on “illegal” religious activities was carried out at the same time, leading to the closure of mosques and Koranic schools, the confiscation of “reactionary” or “illegal” religious materials, and arbitrary arrests. According to unofficial sources, in the space of three months between May and September 1996, 180 Muslim religious leaders, Koranic professors and students were detained in Xinjiang and more than 100 Koranic schools closed down. One of those arrested was Aisha Awasy, a local people’s representative for Kezhou accused of “longstanding illegal religious activities”, who was detained in Akto county, near Kashgar, in western Xinjiang.

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