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China: Uighur journalist given 15-year prison term

Amnesty International has condemned a 15 year prison sentence reportedly imposed on a Uighur journalist who warned Chinese authorities over potential ethnic violence in Xinjiang province on the eve of the July 2009 riots.

Hairat (also known as Hailaite or Gheyret) Niyaz was reportedly today tried and convicted on state security charges by a court in Xinjiang.

According to reports, prosecutors relied on essays he had written prior to the July 2009 riots in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, and interviews he gave to Hong Kong media after the violence.

“Fifteen years imprisonment is an outrageous punishment for journalism that highlighted the longstanding grievances of the Uighur people” said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific.

“Adding to this outrage is the fact that Hairat Niyaz, in his words as an “ordinary person of conscience”, had urged the authorities to take emergency measures to prevent ethnic violence.”

Hairat Niyaz was arrested in October 2009, because, according to police, he had now “given too many interviews”.

In these interviews, Hairat Niyaz highlighted mounting grievances against the implementation of the so-called “bilingual” education policy that had led to many Uighur teachers being laid off.

He spoke about mounting local resentment of employment initiatives sending young Uighurs, mainly women, to work in Southern Chinese factories.

“Hairat Niyaz is a prisoner of conscience and should be released immediately” said Catherine Baber.

At his trial Hairat Niyaz was denied the right to be represented by a lawyer of his own choosing, and only one family member, his wife, was permitted to attend the proceedings.

During the trial he insisted that he had broken no laws and was only carrying out his duty as a citizen and journalist.

Hairat Niyaz is an established journalist and administrator of the Uighurbiz website, which was one of the websites accused of promoting the July unrest. He had been a senior journalist with the Xinjiang Economic Daily, Chief Editorial Director of Xinjiang Legal Daily, and Deputy Director of the Legal Magazine *Fazhi Zongheng*.

“Hairat Niyaz’s testimony and those of other witnesses to the unrest must be openly investigated if we are to get to the truth of what happened in July 2009 in Xinjiang” said Catherine Baber.

Amnesty International is calling for an independent investigation into the violence of July 2009, including into what and who caused the violence, how many people died, and who killed them.