

China carries out mass arrests in Xinjiang

By John Chan
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The Chinese government is tightening its grip in the northwestern Uighur region of Xinjiang. On July 29, 253 people were arrested over their alleged involvement in the July 5 riot in Urumqi, the provincial capital. On August 2, an additional 319 were arrested.

The police had previously reported that over 1,400 had been detained shortly after the protest. Authorities claim that 197 people, mainly Han Chinese civilians, died at the hands of Uighur rioters, and 1,700 people were injured.

The July 5 riot was sparked by Uighur demands for justice after a deadly brawl involving Uighur workers at a toy factory in Guangdong's Shaoguan city in June, in which two were killed. Beijing is forcing the poor of the country's national minorities into sweatshops in the industrially developed provinces as a new source of cheap labour. The ugly attack on the Uighur workers was a product of rising job losses and the promotion of Han chauvinism.

Exiled Uighur groups have disputed the official account, insisting that a peaceful protest turned violent only because of police attacks. Uighur World Congress (UWC) leader Rebiya Kadeer recently declared in Tokyo that 10,000 Uighurs had "disappeared", either killed or detained by the Chinese security forces.

The regime claims that the riot was instigated and planned by exiled Uighur groups such as the UWC to promote its separatist aims. Beijing has admitted killing only 12 "mobsters", claiming their deaths were justified because of their violence.

Ethnic tensions in Xinjiang are a symptom of China's deepening social crisis, produced by widening social inequality and the lack of democratic rights. The regime's brutal response in effectively imposing martial law on a city of 2.7 million is rooted in its fear that the protests could ignite broader social unrest.

Three weeks after the disturbances in Xinjiang, a senior manager was killed in a protest against

privatisation by tens of thousands of workers at the Tonghua Iron and Steel Group in northeastern China. While the killing of an executive drew international media attention, other protests also point to sharp social tensions.

On July 10-13, despite police intimidation, a thousand workers from the state-owned Wuhan Boiler Company blocked a main highway three times in protest against the selling of part of the plant to real estate developers. On July 16, two thousand workers from Hengfeng Textile in Dezhou city, Shandong province, staged a five-day strike and demonstrations against low wages, long hours and impending privatisation.

Beijing's police-state repression in Xinjiang serves to intimidate the working class and rural poor of all ethnic backgrounds throughout China. Urumqi police issued a wanted list of 15 key suspects in late July. Their pictures and details have been widely circulated by state media outlets, with warnings to turn themselves in or be "punished severely".

Chinese authorities have set mid-August for the start of detainees' trials at an intermediate court in Urumqi. Although only 83 of those arrested will be charged, it is likely that they will be prosecuted for violent crimes such as homicide and arson. Days after the July 5 riots, Urumqi's Communist Party secretary Li Zhi declared that those involved in killing would be executed.

Few details were available concerning the 572 additional arrests announced recently. On July 31, Xinjiang police claimed to have foiled five "terrorist" attacks. The official Xinhua news agency described the attacks as planned by "East Turkestan separatists", stating that an unspecified number of suspects had been arrested and that guns, knives, explosives and "materials advocating violence and terrorism" had been confiscated.

The same day, an Islamist group, the Turkestan

Islamic Party, purportedly declared war on Chinese civilians and interests through a video posted on the Internet. Its leader Abdul Haq declared: “They must be targeted both at home and abroad. Their embassies, consulates, centres and gathering places should be targeted. Their men should be killed and captured to seek the release of our brothers who are jailed in East Turkestan ...”

Such statements only play into the hands of the Chinese regime. The video was followed by Chinese government calls for Chinese nationals in a number of countries to be “vigilant” about their safety. It cannot be ruled out that some “terrorist groups” are proxies set up by the regime to justify its repression as part of a “war on terror”.

According to *China Daily*, the Chinese military is drafting an Ordinance for Anti-Terrorism Combat Operations. Major General Meng Guoping told the newspaper: “The PLA has included anti-terror combat training in its elite armed forces divisions since last year and each army division has set up its task force for emergency response.” These measures are aimed at separatist insurgencies and other forms of opposition, not just small bands of so-called terrorists.

Meng’s comment followed joint military exercises by China and Russia in July. The scenario for “Peace Mission 2009” was large-scale dislocation and insurgencies in country “A” in Central Asia, fuelled by the global economic crisis, which threatened to spread to other areas. China and Russia, after supposedly securing a UN mandate, deployed tanks, mechanised troops and war planes to intervene and suppress the upheaval. In fact, such “anti-terror” operations will be targeted against any uprising, including by the working class in China.

China’s police-state measures in Xinjiang went virtually unopposed by the major powers, apart from limited expressions of concern about human rights abuses. Beijing expressed its “appreciation” to the Obama administration for its “moderate” attitude toward the Xinjiang unrest, after Washington told Beijing it was a “domestic affair”.

As a result, Beijing has taken a more aggressive stance internationally, protesting to a number of governments, including Japan and Australia, after they granted visas to UWC leader Kadeer. Several Chinese directors boycotted a film festival in Melbourne to

protest the screening of a documentary about Kadeer’s life. Hackers placed a Chinese national flag on the festival’s web site, along with a message condemning Kadeer as a “terrorist” who must “apologise to all the Chinese people”. Festival manager Vivian Hickman received death threats for refusing to stop the screening.

Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, concerned to protect his country’s economic interests, was careful to distance Canberra from Kadeer. “She argues what the Chinese would describe as separatism and, of course, Australia respects the territorial sovereignty and integrity of China over the Western provinces,” he said.

The *Financial Times* spelled out the fears in international ruling circles about China’s instability. “China is more fragile than its increasingly strident tone suggests. Its economy has been kept churning by enforced bank lending that could yet rebound in asset price bubbles or a crop of bad loans. Communist party control is strong but brittle. Given the choice between projecting China’s authority on the world stage at this month’s G8 summit in Italy or tackling brewing ethnic conflict in Xinjiang, Hu Jintao, China’s president, chose to rush home,” it stated.

The world’s major corporations are dependent on the exploitation of cheap labour in China, and thus Western governments have been generally supportive of the regime’s dictatorial means to maintain the social and ethnic cohesion.

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