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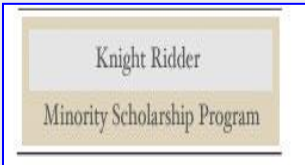
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Thursday, Sep 23, 2004



Posted on Thu, Sep. 23, 2004

In own 'war on terrorism' China leans brutally on restive Muslim Uighur minority

By Tim Johnson
Knight Ridder Newspapers

KASHGAR, China - Under the guise of a "war on terrorism," China has launched such an implacable campaign of repression on its Muslim Uighur minority that it's stopped cold nearly all violent attacks.

Not so long ago, far western China was roiled by more than 200 bombings and assassinations. More recently, a brutal crackdown reported by human rights groups has ushered in a measure of calm to remote, oil-rich Xinjiang.

China has shrugged off criticism and pledged anew to obliterate any glimmer of separatist sentiment within the ethnic Uighurs, who number about 8 million.

Today, the Uighurs (pronounced Weegers), who live in arid dun-colored towns and cities on the edge of the forbidding Taklimakan Desert, dwell in resentful coexistence with migrant Han Chinese flooding their homeland. They bristle at how China has restricted their religious freedom, yet fear to speak out amid the pervasive presence of security agents.

Communist Party leaders sound triumphant in describing their efforts to quash Uighur separatists, linking them to a global network of al-Qaida terrorism.

"Xinjiang has dealt a heavy blow to nationalist, splittist and terrorist forces since the 1990s," Wang Lequan, the top Communist Party official, told a group of visiting foreign reporters in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, a huge area officially called the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

So far this year, Wang said, police have broken up 22 cells of Uighur rebels and handed out sentences to more than 50 of them, including the death penalty.

The last known violent attack in Xinjiang was in 2001. But Uighur activists in exile say they haven't given up on a dream of an independent homeland, which they call East Turkestan, and they don't believe that China's arrest of thousands of

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An Uighur man reads a newspaper in his language while a Chinese Han woman talks on a public phone in a commercial district in Urumqi, Xiangjiang, China.

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Uighur activists and Muslim clerics will bring long-term stability.

"I do not know when the pressure-cooker situation will explode, but I am sure it will happen," said Dilxat Raxit, a spokesman for the East Turkestan Information Center, an exile group based in Sweden and Germany.

Chinese officials portray Xinjiang as pacified and the Uighurs as a contented part of a national tapestry that includes 55 other ethnic minority groups.

In organizing a tour for foreign journalists around Xinjiang, the Foreign Ministry set up meetings with a "typical Uighur family" and officials, many of whom said Uighurs should integrate more fully into China.

"We try to encourage the Uighurs to speak Chinese. That would be convenient for them to do," said Mohammed Sayed of the Islamic Scripture School in Urumqi.

Even as they speak of pacification, officials wield an iron fist in Xinjiang. Most Uighurs spoke only warily. Secret police often tailed a journalist breaking from a group.

At a newly built housing compound in the eastern part of Kashgar, a city near the border with Kyrgyzstan, a crowd of Uighurs grew agitated at a visitor's questions. A weeping woman held her wrists together as if she were handcuffed. Others exhorted a translator: "Tell him the truth!"

The translator began to interpret their grievances, only to stop abruptly.

"We are not alone," he said, signaling some agents lurking nearby.

Uighurs have numerous complaints, ranging from education and health care to lack of religious freedom. Up to 50 children crowd elementary classrooms. HIV infection per capita in Xinjiang, acute among Uighurs, is the highest in China, due to widespread use of heroin imported from Afghanistan and Burma.

Authorities limit the religious practice of Uighurs more than of other Muslim minorities, such as the Hui. Under the rubric of the "10 No's," officials bar those under 18 from entering mosques, ban foreign Muslims from meeting local imams (religious leaders) and prohibit the use of the word "jihad," or "holy war." Mosques routinely are blocked from using loudspeakers.

After the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, China saw an opening to crack down further on Uighur separatists.

"Over the last three years, tens of thousands of people are reported to have been detained for investigation in the region," the London-based human rights group Amnesty International said in a report in July. Thousands are believed to toil in forced labor camps. Others have been executed, though how many is unclear.

"The government basically sees Islam as a threat to China's stability," said Alim Seytoff, the general secretary of the Uyghur American Association, an exile group that represents some 1,000 Uighurs who are living in the United States.

Wang, the party official, said Uighur terrorism in the 1990s killed more than 160 people and injured 400, including religious figures and party cadres.

More than 1,000 Uighurs trained at al Qaida or Taliban bases before U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan in late 2001, Wang said, and Uighur extremist groups overseas are seeking to fuel violence in Xinjiang.

"They have sent foot soldiers repeatedly to Xinjiang to organize violent activities," Wang said.

China has rallied a regional security alliance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, to lean on neighboring Central

Asian nations to repatriate wanted Uighur extremists. Those returned generally have faced execution.

China also has gotten limited support from the United States, which after months of pressure from Beijing agreed in mid-2002 to freeze the assets of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a small Uighur separatist group, as a terrorist organization.

The Bush administration also reportedly allowed Chinese agents to observe interrogations of 22 Uighurs believed to be among the 600 or so detainees at the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. So far, the United States has declined to repatriate the Uighurs.

Whether China has subdued Uighur separatism permanently is an open question.

"Last year, Xinjiang's public security situation was very good," the chair of the provincial government, Ismael Tiliwaldi, said in April.

Others say Uighur discontent simmers, and will vent one day.

"If you push a group of people into a corner by stripping them of their rights, it will radicalize the people, forcing them to strike back," said Seytoff, the exile leader.

