

China: Xinjiang crisis deepens

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Heads of state at the G8 summit in Italy were taken by surprise yesterday when Chinese President Hu Jintao suddenly decided to return home to deal with the ongoing crisis in Xinjiang. Hopes that China could play an important role in discussions on the global financial crisis were punctured by developments in Xinjiang, which underscore the country's escalating social tensions.

So far no world leader has publicly condemned the massive crackdown by Chinese security forces in Urumqi or challenged Beijing's claim that its heavily-armed troops are there to maintain social order and prevent further ethnic conflict.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said: "We know there is a long history of tension and discontent, but the most immediate matter is to bring the violence to a conclusion." Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd declared: "[R]estraint is required now on the part of all parties in order to bring about a peaceful settlement to this difficulty."

Hu was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) secretary of Tibet and directed the bloody suppression of local protests in that region in March 1989. Within weeks of those protests, social tensions erupted nationally and were only ended with the Tiananmen Square massacre. The Xinjiang crisis has the same potential to ignite China's social powder keg, with far-reaching implications for world capitalism.

Hu's sudden return indicates that the CCP leadership regards the protest by Uighurs in Urumqi last Sunday and the subsequent ethnic conflicts in Xinjiang as a national crisis. Beijing is acutely conscious that the unrest among national minorities has deep social roots.

The trigger for the Urumqi protest was not in Xinjiang but Guangdong province, thousands of kilometres away, where the ruling party's program of urging employers to use poor ethnic minorities as cheap labour has led to ethnic tensions with the Han Chinese population.

Fuelled by the Han chauvinism that has been increasingly promoted by the CCP, the tensions erupted last month into a deadly assault on Uighur workers at a major toy factory in Shaoguan city. The incident ignited pent-up anger over social inequality and ethnic discrimination among the Uighur masses, who are among the most oppressed sections of the Chinese working class.

A comment in the official People's Daily on Wednesday presented the unrest in Xinjiang as a matter of violating "law and order" and called for the rebuilding of the state's authority in order to restore social order. However, it is unclear how the regime can achieve this except through the use of force, which will only inflame the situation.

The state-controlled media has continued to spread horrifying and bloody stories of Uighur mobs attacking Han civilians. Li Zhi, Urumqi's CCP secretary, declared yesterday that while Uighur university students were misled and should be treated leniently, "those who committed crimes with cruel means" would be executed.

Li's message revealed the regime's class orientation, similar to that which animated the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. While some students may be treated leniently, workers and the urban poor, depicted as "mobs" or "hooligans", deserve brutal punishment or death. Exiled Uighur groups have claimed that 600-800 Uighur protestors have been killed by government troops and 3,000 arrested.

The heads of China's police-state apparatus were in Urumqi yesterday for a show of force as thousands of paramilitary troops flooded into the resource-rich province. Police officers in riot gear marched through the city, chanting slogans calling for social stability. Helicopters circled overhead, while armoured vehicles equipped with machine guns patrolled the streets.

Inspecting 2,000 armed police in the Peoples Square, the paramilitary police national chief, Wu Shuangzhan said yesterday was the "most crucial day" for restoring order. In a televised visit to a hospital where injured police were being treated, public security minister Meng Jiangzhu reiterated that Sunday's protest was a violent crime provoked by separatists headed by exiled Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer.

On Tuesday, local CCP secretary Li publicly persuaded Han protestors to return home, because the authorities would "execute the murderers". As scuffles between Uighurs and Han continued in parts of the city, Li threatened to punish any law breakers, regardless of their ethnic background. Some Han aggressors against Uighurs were arrested on that day.

However, the regime's security measures have only encouraged backward elements in the Han communities, who have called for revenge against innocent Uighur residents. Media reports have shown Han residents carrying clubs, steel bars and other sharp objects in the name of protecting themselves.

The Associated Press reported fear in the Uighur areas: "When someone yelled, 'The Han are coming!' children scampered indoors and women ran shrieking through a backstreet market... Within seconds, the men armed themselves with spears stashed behind doors and under market stands... Piles of rocks were placed across the street for ammunition."

The reality is that Uighurs have become second-class citizens in China. The Financial Times yesterday reported the conditions in Balikun, a poor Uighur district in Urumqi, where "dirty alleys and blackened concrete housing blocks ... are a far cry from the new residential compounds springing up across the city," mainly for Han residents. A local youth told the newspaper: "Many young people do nothing at all. Regular jobs are hard to come by."

Most residents in the district come from rural and less developed parts of Xinjiang. The majority of Muslim women are veiled, and speak little Mandarin Chinese, while most men work in local slaughterhouses or are unemployed.

The expanding construction and mining industries in Xinjiang tend to hire Han workers, rather than local Uighurs, who are less trained and have difficulty communicating with management. Small retail and hospitality businesses operated by Han immigrants often

overrun local Uighur competitors.

The government's policy of encouraging Uighurs to become migrant workers in eastern provinces is not helping ethnic integration. Far away from their home villages, their peasant and Muslim backgrounds come into sharp conflict with bustling urban capitalism, where they confront harsh labour discipline and long hours in dirty sweatshops.

The plight of Uighur workers is bound up with the enormous class conflicts created by the CCP's pro-capitalist policies. Hong-Kong's Cheng Ming magazine reported in February that the number of protests, petitions and demonstrations in China reached 127,467 in 2008, involving more than 12 million people—compared to 87,000 incidents in 2005. Of the 2008 protests, 467 involved storming local government departments, 615 saw attacks on police and judicial authorities and 110 featured attacks on government buildings and vehicles.

On June 19 and 20, up to 70,000 angry protestors clashed with 10,000 police and troops in Shishou city in Hubei province over official corruption and business collusion. Two days later, a thousand students at Nanjing Industrial Technical School smashed windows, cars and the campus supermarket, after learning that they would receive lower level degrees, and therefore bleaker job prospects.

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