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CHINAWHYS COUNTRY RISK ASSESSMENT – UNREST IN XINJIANG

By Cedric Witek of ChinaWhys – July 2009

Facts on the Ground

- Major civil unrest has broken out in the Chinese western province of Xinjiang since Sunday 5 July, starting in the provincial capital of Urumqi and later reportedly spreading to other parts of the province, especially the city of Kashgar to the southwest.
- The unrest stemmed from initially peaceful demonstrations started by local residents in Urumqi over the allegedly botched investigation surrounding the death of fellow ethnic Uighurs in Guangdong Province last month – they were apparently killed in the course of a savage scuffle with Han Chinese which broke out over allegations that a Han Chinese woman had been raped by Uighurs.
- The death toll so far in Xinjiang has been estimated at 156, with around 1100 wounded. Initial reports suggest that Uighurs attacked Han Chinese indiscriminately in the streets of Urumqi. Although local Uighurs deny this and instead allege that Chinese security forces fired into the crowds, there appears to be strong circumstantial evidence that some Uighurs did engage in serious sectarian violence.
- On 7 July mobs of Han Chinese armed with rudimentary weapons took to the streets of Urumqi intent on retaliation and were stopped by local security forces, though not before smashing up Uighur-owned businesses and causing some casualties. On the same day more Uighur protests erupted in parts of Urumqi and in Kashgar.
- By the evening of 8 July the security forces appeared to have regained some control over the area, thanks in part to a massive armed presence and a partial ban on communications: the internet and mobile phone services are down in most of Xinjiang and sources on the ground report a large number of police and paramilitary units on the streets, as well as helicopter patrols.
- This is generally reckoned the worst civil unrest that all of China has known since the Chinese government's repression of the student movement at Tiananmen Square in Beijing 20 years ago.
- It is still uncertain at this stage how stable Xinjiang is, and how much control the Chinese security forces have regained. But what does appear certain is that whatever fragile equilibrium had been achieved in Xinjiang over the last few years and decades has now been shattered, and that repercussions for the province as well as China in general will be sizeable.

Background of Current Crisis

- Xinjiang has always been a disputed and reluctant part of China – for much of its history, the territory now known as Xinjiang has been populated by ethnic Turkic tribes professing the Muslim faith (collectively known as the Uighurs) who have very little in common with the Han Chinese, the dominant ethnic group most commonly associated by outsiders with China.
- On several occasions before the 20th century, China managed to assert a piecemeal presence in Xinjiang but never succeeded in imposing anything resembling proper control. In the late 1880s Xinjiang (“the new territory”) was officially declared part of the Chinese Empire but this illusion of sovereignty was destroyed shortly afterwards during the Republican period starting in 1911, which saw Xinjiang torn between Han Chinese warlords more or less independent of the Chinese government, belligerent Uighur chieftains and Russia, eager to exploit the territory’s considerable natural resources and play upon divisions in China to its own benefit.
- It was only after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 that China really managed to assert some substantive hold over the region. In 1954 Xinjiang was declared an “autonomous region” in apparent deference to local sensitivities but this was strictly for show: in reality the Chinese maintained an iron grip over the province and there were few opportunities for local Uighurs to gain a significant say in the affairs of their own homeland. Fearing unrest, the Chinese authorities strictly regulated local political and religious activity.
- In some respects, from the Uighur point of view, China’s presence in Xinjiang came to resemble a military occupation. Much of this territory three times the size of France was administered by paramilitary collectives, and in the 1960s Xinjiang with its vast deserts and sparse population became the test site for China’s first atomic bombs. In the mid 1960s to 1970s, the Cultural Revolution which shook all of China to its foundations caused especially severe suffering in Xinjiang, as the Uighurs were singled out for particularly cruel abuse at the hands of Chinese Communist fanatics due to their ethnic minority status and religious devoutness.
- A steady immigration of Han Chinese to the province was also encouraged on various motives such as “developing the West” and taking advantage of Xinjiang’s large natural resources. The result was a gradual dilution of the Uighur population, so that today there are almost as many Han Chinese in the province as there are Uighurs (in the capital Urumqi where the riots broke out, significantly, Uighurs are already outnumbered).
- As more and more Chinese immigrated into Xinjiang, the Uighurs found themselves marginalised and unable to partake of the spoils resulting from ever-increasing investments in the region spurred by the Chinese government. The economic balance tilted in favour of Han Chinese and not enough was done to include the Uighurs, whose educational level stayed below par and whose prospects for employment came to depend on a proficiency in the Chinese language which few government schools could provide.
- The Uighurs slipped into second-class citizen status and many chose to leave for more affluent parts of China, which often entailed little more than eking out a living by manning mobile kebab stalls or peddling drugs to occasional passers-by. Meanwhile assimilation between the two communities in Xinjiang remained elusive, the Uighurs blaming the Han for what they viewed as political and religious oppression and the Han resenting the Uighurs for begrudging the Chinese gifts of “civilisation” and

economic development – and for being excluded from some of the more egregious political restrictions affecting Han Chinese, such as the one-child policy.

What next?

- Whatever measure of stability is achieved by Chinese security forces over the next few days and weeks is likely to be superficial, as the bitterness caused by these riots on both sides of the ethnic divide runs deep: Uighurs are incensed to have received comparatively little protection from the security forces against the violent retaliation of Han Chinese mobs. Uighur women are outraged over what they see as the arbitrary abduction of their husbands and sons by the security forces, and this grievance in particular will continue to be a source of great tension over the next few weeks.
- On the Han Chinese side, residents of Urumqi in particular are shocked at the suddenness with which the Uighurs turned on them, and sectarian hatred is growing. “Uighurs are spoilt like pandas”, one Han Chinese shopkeeper was reported as saying, “when they steal, rob, rape or kill, they can get away with it. If we Han did the same thing we’d be executed.”
- The Chinese government will in all likelihood maintain a heavy security blanket over the region in the weeks to come. The head of Urumqi’s Communist Party has already announced that those found to have rioted would be executed, and to the outside world the Chinese government is presenting a characteristically hard-line position, claiming that the riots were started by “terrorists” and “separatists” from abroad (particularly the World Uighur Congress, a largely ineffectual association of Uighur exiles who seem singularly incapable of masterminding such an event).
- The heaviest of the Chinese security forces will probably leave in the middle term but the province is likely to remain much more tightly governed than it has been, at least until the end of the year – the Chinese Communist Party is anxious to make sure that nothing mars the celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the People’s Republic in October (Hu Jintao has already been embarrassed by having to interrupt his G8 trip because of the riots). It is most probable that Xinjiang will see the setting up of military checkpoints in urban areas, considerably increased police patrolling and the introduction of some draconian emergency measures like the shooting on sight of suspected rioters (though it will not be announced publicly).
- The Chinese government is also likely to start putting some discreet measures in gear aimed at ensuring that the events of the recent days do not happen again. The Communist Party is no doubt acutely aware that it must “manage” the Uighurs somewhat so as to avoid the resurgence of fresh riots, not least because these could easily spread to other restive parts of China (i.e. Tibet). But most importantly, the Communist Party will want to avoid antagonising the Han settlers, who have felt in recent days that the security forces were ineffective in protecting them, and have displayed hostility towards the army and police when prevented from brutalising Uighurs. The Communist Party will want above all to avert a situation in which Han Chinese are fighting other Han Chinese.
- In so doing, apart from the usual rounding-up of suspected Uighur ringleaders and crackdowns on perceived religious agitators, the government may resort to a gradual process of forced resettlement and segregation, deporting Uighurs in strategic locations to areas where their potential for nuisance is reduced and their opportunities to come into contact with Han Chinese are more remote. This may go as far as internment in military-run facilities but could also include physical partitioning, like the creation

of new “security areas” in sensitive parts of Xinjiang and the construction of security barriers of the type seen in parts of Belfast or Jerusalem.

- Although this may pacify the rowdier elements in the Han Chinese community, however, it is difficult to imagine a scenario through which the Chinese government might be able to entice the Uighurs. Any grand government containment plan is sure to be traumatic to them and will almost certainly solidify their general hostility towards Han rule. Furthermore, whereas Uighur opposition previously tended to be sparse and diffuse in nature, the riots have already had a consolidating effect – this may be looked upon in later years as a moment when organised resistance to Chinese rule began in earnest, the “Bloody Sunday” of Xinjiang.
- There is a high risk, indeed, that Uighur resistance may now coalesce and take new and dangerous forms. Unlike Tibet, Xinjiang has a natural hinterland in the plateaus of Central Asia, and relatively porous borders. The population outside those borders in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is made up in considerable numbers of ethnic groups close to the Uighurs, Turkic Muslims living in comparatively weak states and who may be amenable to the idea of assisting their coreligionists in their plight. This would be an ideal rear base from which to wage a low-intensity campaign against the Chinese. Generally such campaigns prove to be remarkably resilient and difficult to put down, even with large conventional armies like China's.
- If an entrenched resistance to Chinese rule were to develop in Xinjiang and its border areas, this would also have dramatic strategic implications for regional stability – Xinjiang is contiguous to Afghanistan and the deeply troubled northern regions of Pakistan. The sharing of intelligence, training and equipment between dissident Uighurs and Taliban insurgents or Pakistani extremists would surely be a matter of time: this in turn would instantly expand the current theatre of conflict and complicate the already tenuous, ad hoc security arrangements that exist between the US, Pakistan, Afghanistan and (to a lesser extent) India.
- Even if such a situation fails to develop, Xinjiang will be less safe for the foreseeable future: an increasingly angry and marginalised Uighur underclass with lessened prospects of emancipation will increase the chances of random acts of violence, arson, unrest and active terrorism. The new security infrastructure which the Chinese government is sure to put in place in Xinjiang to mitigate this risk will be cumbersome and detrimental to business development.
- More broadly, the Chinese government will be steeling itself for the increased possibility of terrorist attacks in the rest of country as well, with predictable consequences for the movement of goods, capital and labour.