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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2013]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Continued Unrest in Xinjiang, PRC

Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) has received reliable reports of human rights violations that have taken place in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), the People's Republic of China (PRC) during recent months. Since late March 2013, four major incidents of unrest have occurred, respectively in Maralbeshi (Chinese: Bachun), Lukchun, Urumqi and Hotan (Chinese: Heitan), in which between 103 and 138 confirmed people have lost their lives, with the youngest being 13 years old, and between 125 and 136 have been arrested, detained or sentenced. However, the amount of detentions could be as much as 735, were more clarified information released by the Chinese authorities.

At least two individuals have so far been sentenced to death on “terrorism” charges, with the Chinese authorities failing to provide any conclusive evidence of their purported involvement in these crimes.

These latest incidents, and the subsequent, heavy, security and information crackdown, are reminiscent of one of the worst periods of human rights violations in the XUAR in recent memory that took place in Urumqi in July 2009.

Maralbeshi, Lukchun, Urumqi and Hotan Incidents

On 23 April 2013, the Chinese authorities revealed through its media that at approximately noon 21 people were killed and 19 arrested (11 immediately after, with a further 8 six days later) at Serikbuya (Selibuyua) in Maralbeshi. Whilst the Chinese contended that the suspects were found to be constructing “homemade bombs”, possessing “East Turkestan” flags promoting independence, and that “pro-jihadist” slogans were emblazoned on the flags, these allegations have failed to be verified independently, nor has any evidence been provided to support such assertions.

On the other hand, independent international media has largely corroborated via interviews and film-footage with Uyghur human rights organisations assessing that the incident was caused by an illegal house search and the forcing to unveil of a Uyghur woman and for Uyghur men to shave off their beards.

Respected BBC journalist Damien Grammaticas found upon arrival at the scene that many of the locals with whom he spoke were frightened to speak to him due to fears of reprisals; many people had been informed to not speak to “journalists” and “outsiders”; and that the official narrative was markedly different from the versions of locals. Mr Grammaticas and his team were subsequently temporarily detained and removed from the scene as the Chinese authorities ensured that information coming to and from this location was severely restricted.

Two months following this incident as tensions continued to bubble, a second incident occurred in Lukchun, the Turpan Prefecture on 26 June 2013, in which at least 35 people lost their lives. In the same fashion as the previous Maralbeshi incident, the Chinese authorities were quick to label this incident as another terrorist incident. In response, they sought to place another stranglehold upon information flowing out of the area. The Associated Press reported from near the scene that the local area had been cordoned off, with armed police patrolling all entry points into the area.

Refuting the official narrative, however, eminent Beijing-based Uyghur scholar Professor Ilham Tohti, who himself has been subjected to years of harassment, had remarked that it was the result of forced demolition of houses, whilst the Uyghur American Association (UAA) furthered that tensions were running high after a 7 year old Uyghur boy was “hacked to death” by a Han Chinese individual.

As the regional situation escalated, further major incidents erupted in Urumqi and Hotan, along with other smaller incidents that were not picked up by mainstream media, resulting in further fatalities and detentions.

According to Radio Free Asia (RFA), several hundred Uyghur took to the streets in Hanerik, Hotan, to protest the detention of a young Imam and several others who had refused to preach in line with the Communist Party policies. Shortly after the protests started, police fired upon the protesters, killing as many as 15, whilst at least 200 people were detained, as confirmed by the local Communist Party chief during a call with RFA on 30 June 2013.

Reporting and Social Media Crackdowns

Whilst the information provided by independent media and Uyghur human rights organisations is reliable, the lack of ability to investigate further what happened has left many questions unanswered, in particular the fates, whereabouts and conditions of all those detained, and the situations during which fatalities occurred.

Several independent media who were able to be on scene in the aftermath of the incidents, including the BBC, CNN, Associate Press and a VRT team from the Belgian Flemish-language De Redactie, all reported that they were harassed by the local police and security forces, some of whom had film-footage deleted and were detained before being promptly expelled from the region.

These sorts of restrictions and harassments placed upon free and independent reporting have sweeping human rights implications which go beyond simply the rights of journalists. As the Chinese media is significantly compromised by political interference whereby all articles must be vetted by the local propaganda office, the media is not able to report in good faith the news accurately and thus not allowing the police, judiciary and the political system to be placed under the scrutiny of civil society for any human rights abuses being carried out.

Alarming, many of those detained surrounding these incidents were done so after having discussed, disseminated or posted information pertaining to them, usually on charges of “spreading rumours”, “inciting ethnic hatred and discrimination”, and engaging in “disorderly behaviour”. This is in addition to at least one case where Mutallip Imin, a volunteer contributor to the Chinese-language Uyghur website uighurbiz.net, which was reporting on these incidents, who has disappeared since trying to board a plane to Turkey to continue his studies there.

Military Drills and Heightened Security

In response to the recent incidents, the Chinese authorities have sent in the military to quell further dissent.

CNN journalist David McKenzie reported from Urumqi on 12 July 2013 and stated that there was a heavy security presence there with a tense atmosphere. At almost every intersection, there were riot police with automatic weapons and riot gear. The video report also showed military personnel standing in columns in the People's Square in Urumqi, undertaking military drills, with swathes of military vehicles in the background.

Various representatives from the Chinese authorities, including number 4 of the CCP politburo, Yu Zhengsheng, have come out saying that round-the-clock patrols will be implemented, in addition to spot-checks and security drills by the military. In a post on the Public Security Ministry's website, Meng Jianzhu stated that troops must patrol in all weather conditions, “raise their visibility, maintain a deterrent threat and strengthen the public's sense of security.”

STP is concerned that the root causes of tensions in the XUAR are not being dealt with or are treated with reticence by the Chinese authorities. Yearly repressions on Uyghur culture, language, identity and religion - especially around sensitive times such as the onset of Ramadan and the anniversaries of 5 July 2009 Urumqi incident - serve to only exacerbate incidents of this kind. Rather than dealing with these longstanding issues, the PRC is cranking up its repressions and using the global war on terror to legitimise its heavy handed approach, without actually providing proof that there is a sustained terrorist threat. This sentiment is shared by many Uyghurs who, on 1 July 2013, used Chinese social media to decry the allegations of terrorism in these incidents. Whilst all acts of violence must be condemned, it is vitally important that the Chinese authorities make a genuine, concerted effort to bring about economic, social, cultural and political freedoms to Uyghurs, whose repressions thereof are well documented.

Recommendations

STP therefore calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the government of the People's Republic of China to:

- Allow unfettered access to the XUAR in order for the recent events to be placed under the full scrutiny of independent media, civil society organisations and other stakeholders so that the root causes, subsequent developments and any human rights violations that happened can be truly assessed.
- Extend an open invitation to the relevant UN Special Procedure mandate holders to the region, in particular the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief, the Special Rapporteur in the field of Cultural Rights, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD), the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression and of opinion, and the Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial, summary or arbitrary killings.
- Seek advice from an array of different stakeholders so as to ascertain the best way in which it can address the longstanding human rights issues within its territory.

STP therefore calls on the Human Rights Council to call on the international community to:

- Urge the Chinese authorities to carry out a comprehensive, independent investigation into the recent incidents.
 - Urge the Chinese authorities to address the longstanding issues that are precipitating the tensions in the XUAR.
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