

China:

Resurgence of the Uighurs in Xinjiang

CHINESE officials claimed to have restored order in Xinjiang province... According to Beijing's authorized version, the three-day battle between police and ethnic Uighur protesters in the city of Yining, about 50 kilometers from the Kazak border, in January-February this year, was northwestern China's bloodiest outbreak of mass unrest in 50 years.

At least nine people died, including four police officers, and 150 or more were injured. Uighurs outside China insisted that the toll was far higher - and (that) the riots and the mass arrests continued ... in several cities....

The Uighurs, a mostly Muslim people, say the trouble erupted when police burst into a prayer meeting at a private home near the end of Ramadhan, the holy month of fasting and penitence. A mob of angry Uighurs gathered and spun out of control. The Chinese say it began when a group of young Uighurs, whipped up by unnamed "hostile foreign elements," staged an independence demonstration, and the march degenerated into a wave of "beating," "smashing" and looting."

Whatever the provocation, bloodshed in Xinjiang is the last thing Beijing needs. Cracking down on Xinjiang's Muslims won't win the People's Republic any friends in the Islamic world,

where Beijing has spent decades carefully building better ties. Oil from the Mideast is vital to China's development plans - especially since the country became a net petroleum importer two years ago.

And China's aspirations to diplomatic superpower status depend heavily on its Arab allies. As soon as news of the Yining riots began trickling out, however, newspapers in places like Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan denounced Beijing for its handling of the unrest.

All the same, Chinese officials aren't likely to ease up. Any hint of vacillation in Xinjiang could only encourage renewed unrest among other dissatisfied minorities in China, especially the people of Tibet. What's more, Xinjiang (unlike Tibet) matters to China in ways that go far beyond mere historical symbolism.

The country's economic planners expect that the province's untapped oil reserves will become a major source of power for Chinese industry. They envision vast wind heat fields, possibly irrigated with water melted from neighbouring glaciers, to solve the looming grain crisis. And with roughly one sixth of China's total land area, Xinjiang is already serving at least one important purpose: millions of Chinese from overpopulated areas have found new breathing room here.

Yet trouble has never been far beneath the surface. Xinjiang (the name means "new frontier" in Mandarin) became part of China barely a century ago, in the closing decades of the Ching dynasty. It didn't remain Chinese for long. Rebellions were frequent, and control of the territory swung back and forth between the Chinese, the Russians and even, for a few years of self-rule, the Turkic inhabitants themselves. Mao Zedong's communists completed the conquest in 1919.

But to this day the native Uighurs, roughly seven million of the province's 16 million people, have never been fully assimilated into Chinese society. The Chinese settlers tend to despise them as ignorant barbarians. They, in turn, resent their Han neighbours as arrogant trespassers. In the words of one frequent visitor to the province, "Chinese and Uighurs just don't mix."

In fact, the combination seems increasingly explosive... In 1950 roughly 15 per cent of Xinjiang's people were ethnic Chinese. Today the figure is 38 per cent, and the influx is expected to become a stampede when Beijing completes its planned east-west rail line to span the province. The shift has been especially pronounced in the major cities.

Forty years ago the population of the province's capital, Urumqi,

was only 20 per cent Han; now it's 80 per cent Han. The Chinese look at the soaring new glass office towers of Urumqi and congratulate themselves on bringing such progress and prosperity to Xinjiang.

The Uighurs go home to their shabby two-storey brick houses and wonder whether they will ever get their share. Uighur workers complain that the settlers get all the desirable jobs. Most of the province's top posts are held by middle-class Uighurs, but everyone knows it's their Han "assistants" who make all the important decisions.

There's hardly any part of daily life that isn't a sore spot for the Uighurs. Tour guides grumble to Western visitors about the government's habit of giving new Mandarin names to all their ancient ruins.

A particularly sensitive topic is China's "one child" family-planning policy. Uighurs are allowed two children; in rural areas they may even have three. But they believe it's none of Beijing's business.

The resentment has grown increasingly violent since 1990. Many young Uighurs envy their neighbours in the newly independent Muslim republics of Central Asia, although Beijing has warned the former Soviet states to give no aid or encouragement to the Uighur separatists. Xinjiang's young radicals have blown up bridges, bombed buses and assassinated local Islamic leaders,



The Uighur Muslim population of Xinjiang (Eastern Turkistan) resent their Han Chinese neighbours as arrogant trespassers in their land.

who had spoken in favour of Beijing's policies.

The Chinese have retaliated by curbing religious worship, shutting down local publishing houses and bestowing broad police powers on a special military "rapid-deployment force." Devout Muslims who attend prayer services worry about losing their jobs.

No one but the province's official publishing house is allowed to print books on Islam. A year ago, China's president, Jiang Zemin, issued a 10-point battle plan calling for a purge of "all suspicious persons" from state and party jobs in Xinjiang.

Meanwhile, Uighur exiles have begun working to publicize their people's plight. Their aim is to bring the same level of international attention to Xinjiang – or eastern Turkistan, as many of them prefer to call it – that the Dalai Lama has brought to Tibet. Anwar Yusuf, 34, founded the Eastern Turkistan National Freedom Center in Washington in 1995.

His group lobbies American members of Congress, maintains contacts with other exiled Uighurs around the world and publishes books and tapes on Turkic nationalism for circulation inside Xinjiang. Another prominent group is the Eastern Turkistan Union in Europe. Its director, Erkin Alptekin, works closely with Tibet's exiled living god.

The Uighurs have one big advantage over their Tibetan

friends: Islamic identity... Muslim solidarity had its limits, of course. A year ago, the Central Asian republics promised not to abet the Uighurs in exchange for more trade with China. Many young Uighurs continue to nurse a sense of betrayal over the deal. "A flower thrown by my friend hurts more than a stone thrown by my enemy," says one young activist.

Yet militants like the Organization for the Liberation of Uighurstan, led by a former Soviet colonel, continue to operate openly in Kazakhstan capital, Almaty. And Xinjiang's young Uighurs seem to believe that more violence is inevitable... They say, "Do you want us to disappear through slow cultural assimilation or stand up and die like heroes?" Some of them stood up and died in Yining. And unless Beijing can offer some kind of alternative, others will surely follow.

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