

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/china-xinjiang-suffers-information-04-07-2013,44897.html>

Asia - China

Forbidden Zone

Xinjiang suffers information blockade four years after demonstrations

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Chinese authorities clamped a week-long communications [blackout on the Uighur autonomous region as part of a military repression prompted by disturbances in 2009](#). On the eve of those events, Reporters Without Borders has concluded that authorities are maintaining their tight control of information in the most heavily monitored area of China.

"No improvement has been seen since the disturbances of 2009," the press freedom organization reported. "Xinjiang remains targeted by a program of censorship and monitoring directed from Beijing. Acts of violence still under way cannot be covered independently by the Chinese or the foreign media."

Free dissemination in print or online of news and information in the Uighur language is prohibited, the organization said. And numerous human rights violations go unreported, or surface only in disinformation campaigns orchestrated by the Communist Party of China's Central Propaganda Department.

Reporters Without Borders calls on Frank La Rue, the UN special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, to make a site visit in order to provide an account of the scale of the official information blockade and the total absence of genuinely independent and freely operating local media.

"The international community must demand that Beijing allow foreign media access to Xinjiang," the free press organization said, "in order to ensure that violence is not shielded from coverage, as occurred in 2009, when at least 200 people were killed."

New disturbances that broke out in late June of this year show that officials are relying on the same methods and techniques to isolate the region and to control information originating there, Reporters Without Borders said. "Since President Xi Jinping came to power, he has perpetuated a policy that has made Xinjiang virtually an information 'black hole.'"

Overview

Beijing has established an efficient system of prior censorship through publication committees and local propaganda committees in each town and city of the region. These agencies report to central authorities, who filter each item of information transmitted by the subordinate offices.

Uighur-language newspapers are made up virtually entirely of direct translations of Chinese content that is reviewed in minute detail by the publication bureaus to ensure that no content unacceptable to Beijing sees the light of day.

Only a handful of independent Uighur-language newspapers, produced in neighbouring countries and smuggled over the border, manage to circulate in the region. But [censorship blocks any Uighur website unfavourable to the Communist Party](#). In a recent development, proxy servers are used to access to sites that "mirror" foreign-based sites, even though this tactic carries more risk than in the rest of the country.

Only tiny number of news blogs exists, because ensuring online anonymity is impossible, given

the numerous laws requiring identification of each internet user – laws that carry heavy penalties. The anonymous dissemination of articles written by Uighurs for a Uighur audience is a practical impossibility.

As in the rest of mainland China, social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are prohibited. Broadcasts of some radio stations, such as *Radio Free Asia*, manage to reach Xinjiang. But listening to them is a very risky activity.

Beijing has been successfully carrying out a disinformation program. Last October, a Uighur-language site, (<http://uyghur.news.cn/>) was created, with content supplied by Chinese authorities.

As tension mounted with the approach of the 5 July anniversary, the city of Lukqun on 26 June suffered the deadliest disturbances since those of 2009.

The official account said that 35 people were killed. But that figure has not been independently verified because police have barred access to the city. Reporters from *Agence France-Presse*



(AFP) were turned back on 29 June after brief questioning. Disinformation is going largely unchallenged, with the official media – such as the *China Daily* – all describing Uighur oppositionists as “terrorists” who arrived from abroad.

Internet under control

The Chinese internet operates under permanent official supervision.

But in Xinjiang the web faces additional technical obstacles, which Beijing uses in order to diminish dissemination of information.

The download rate in Xinjiang is the country’s slowest. According to the *techinasia.com* site, the download rate is more than twice as slow in the province as in big coastal cities such as Shanghai and Beijing - less than 1.5 mbps, versus 4 mbps.

Social networks such as Twitter and Facebook are censored, as in the rest of mainland China. The use of proxy servers to bypass censorship carries a higher risk than elsewhere in the country.

The most heavily censored content in Xinjiang centres on human rights, minorities, religion and separatist demands. Unsurprisingly, the World Uyghur Congress site is permanently blocked in China.

The government regularly resorts to jamming telecommunications. During the deadly violence that broke on 26 June, all communications lines in the Turpan prefecture were temporarily cut.

“This is clear evidence of the levels of curtailment implemented by the Chinese authorities on the ability of Uyghurs to freely discuss and also know about the human rights situation facing their people,” said Dolkun Isa, secretary-general of the World Uyghur Congress. “But it also goes further by shielding the international community from knowing the full extent of what is happening on the ground, which is extremely concerning.”

Surveillance and repression

Beijing has assigned a great many of its "50 cents party" members (五毛), as its censors are nicknamed (a reference to their piece-rate per censored page) to Xinjiang duties. Studies showed that in 2008, at least 280,000 censors were assigned to monitor the region. No figure has been determined since then. But according to some experts, the total number of censors working in the national network reached about 500,000 in 2011.

These numbers make clear the government's emphasis on surveillance in the Uighur region. The censors concentrate their activities on spreading disinformation in web forums. They also censor pages deemed subversive.

Cyber-attacks, censorship of social networks and arrests often intensify with the approach of dates with special sensitivity in Xinjiang. These include Ramadan, 4 June, and 5 July. Between 29 June and 11 July 2011, the World Uyghur Congress site was blocked, followed a DDoS attack. Wordpress, the site's host, said it had received 25,000 hostile communication requests.

During recent violence, at least 19 web users were arrested on charges of disseminating false rumours.

The case of **Ilham Tohti**, a blogger, uighurbiz.net site director and well-known university professor, illustrates the systematic repression aimed at Uighurs who use the internet to freely provide information and express themselves.

Tohti was [prevented on 2 February of this year from leaving the country](#), and repeatedly interrogated at the Beijing airport by police sent from Xinjiang. He suffers constant official harassment, especially since his coverage of the events of 2009. From 7 July to 22 August 2009, Tohti was detained in secret by local authorities.

Often, people arrested are charged under Articles 73, 83 and 91 of the criminal code, which have expanded the definitions of "terrorism" and of endangering state secrets. According to the Dui Hua Foundation, 50 per-cent of the convictions under these provisions originate in Xinjiang, though the region holds only 2 per-cent of the national population.

"The well known and well documented harassment and curtailment of the freedoms of a highly regarded individual such as professor Ilham Tohti is having significant negative and far-reaching consequences on the wider community," Dolkun Isa said. "It shows to the less visible community that even being in the public eye, and therefore under public scrutiny, that one is not safe from reprisals by the Chinese authorities."

Isa added: "As all avenues of redress have been exhausted, the Uyghur people need more than ever that the international community does as much as it can to fight for improvement of their rights. This is ever more so in the current climate of recent developments."
