



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

China

China – CHN36555 – Xinjiang – Uighurs –
Security situation – Internal relocation –
Zhang Chunxian – Xinjiang High Speed
Railway – Telecommunications

13 May 2010

1. Although circumstances are not good for Uighurs in PRC generally, are there places where the situation is less oppressive for them or where they are more likely to be left alone by the authorities?

While many Uighurs support an independent East Turkistan, their grievances primarily relate to Beijing's policies and treatment. These grievances have become more pronounced in recent years as the national and provincial governments have imposed ever greater cultural and religious restrictions on Uighurs, particularly following 11 September 2001 and the protests of March 2008. In the name of crushing the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism and religious extremism, Beijing has imposed severe restrictions and employed language that many Uighurs believe have contributed to a demonisation of them throughout the PRC.¹ While it is problematic to make definitive pronouncements on regional variations in authoritarian scrutiny of Uighurs in Xinjiang, particularly given the paucity of reliable information flowing out of the province, what is certain is that since the events of 5 July 2009 the levels of security personnel, security budget and scrutiny have increased dramatically. In the present climate, it is unlikely that there are regions in Xinjiang where Uighurs would be 'left alone' by authorities.

Information is tightly controlled in the People's Republic of China: the internet is heavily restricted; all local media agencies are government owned or controlled; international media agencies are monitored; and almost no non-government organisations are allowed to operate in the country. Nowhere are such circumstances more acute than in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) since the violent events in Urumqi in July 2009.² All electronic forms of communication have been restricted; international journalists are escorted; and *Xinhua*, the national news agency, has monopolised the flow of information to the rest of China.^{3 4} The slow restoration of communication services in Xinjiang is discussed in detail in the response to Question 2; however, the hitherto modest restoration of services has not translated into a greater flow of reliable, useful information.

A number of physical and human geography factors combine in Xinjiang to facilitate the ability of the Public Security Bureau (PSB) and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to impose their authority and scrutinise the movements and activities of the estimated 9 million Uighurs in the province. Although the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is vast (1,650,257 sq km), it only has a population of approximately 21 million, giving it one of the

¹ Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang's Protests*, October, pp.9-10 – Attachment 1

² Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang's Protests*, October, p.4 – Attachment 1

³ Grammaticas, D. 2010, 'Trekking 1,000km in China for e-mail', *BBC News*, 11 February
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/asia-pacific/8506601.stm> – Accessed 4 May 2010 – Attachment 2

⁴ 'China arrests Uighur web journalists – CPJ' 2009, *BBC Monitoring Media*, source: Committee to Protect Journalists, New York, 2 November – Attachment 3

lowest population densities in the People's Republic of China. Furthermore, this population is concentrated in urban areas as much of Xinjiang is uninhabitable; high mountain ranges, the Taklamakan Desert and Lop Nur are largely off limits.⁵ This confines most of the population to either the Zungarian Basin north of the capital Urumqi and to a crescent of oases in the western half of the Tarim Basin. Another important factor is the fact that unlike their fellow Turkics, the Kyrgyz and the Kazakhs, ethnic Uighurs are overwhelmingly urbanised, consolidating the population into easily observable communities. The result of this human geography is that although the province is vast, few settled areas are remote from the gaze of Beijing and the reach of the PLA.

Most large Uighur towns include a garrison of PLA. Elsewhere in the XUAR are large installations, most notably Kashgar. Outside of Kashgar, reports the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, are major "high-security satellite tracking stations and other top-secret military facilities... South West of Kashgar is a special military zone. You need to get clearance from the authorities at a series of checkpoints just to enter here. The further you go, you see more military outposts set up to protect this huge border region."⁶ In the response to Question 2 a number of recent infrastructure developments are discussed that enable the PSB and the PLA to rapidly deploy large numbers of personnel to remote regions of the XUAR.

The exact numbers of troops and the location of all garrisons and security facilities in the province are not known; however, anecdotal evidence suggests that security force numbers have increased significantly since the events of July 2009; in November 2009 the *Associated Press* described Xinjiang as "smothered in heavy security".⁷ It is known that the number of PSB officers in the province has also increased (see Question 2 for more detail). As well as these increased numbers, it has also been reported that authorities maintained their intensive monitoring of Uighurs throughout the province; a November 2009 report in *The Guardian* states that authorities in Xinjiang had begun a new "strike hard and punish" campaign to further consolidate the fruits of maintaining stability and eliminate security dangers". *The Guardian* suggests that this campaign is primarily designed to hunt for suspects involved in the July 2009 riots and "terror plots".⁸ In such a climate there are unlikely to be too many places in Xinjiang where Uighurs could be 'left alone' by authorities.

The events in Urumqi on 5 July 2009 are now reasonably well known.⁹ What is less well known is the extent to which protests and violence extended beyond Urumqi; inter-racial tensions are particularly acute in Urumqi, in part due to the fact that the 2000 census found that Uighurs constituted only 12.79 percent of the population of the city. A Committee to Protect Journalists press release has reported that protests also took place in Kashgar; however, it is not known whether this also turned violent as journalists in the city "were promptly detained, escorted to the airport and ordered to leave."¹⁰ No information has been located on the circumstances in other major Uighur towns such as Khotan, Aksu, Turpan or Gulja; however, protests and violence have been recorded in most major centres. Gulja, near the Kazakhstan border, was the scene of events that culminated in a violent crackdown on protestors in February 1997 that resulted in the deaths of scores of protestors and the execution of a number of Uighur leaders.^{11 12} In March 2008, however, protests by Uighurs

⁵ Lop Nur was the site of Chinese nuclear weapons testing from 1964 until the 1990s.

⁶ McDonnell, S. 2009, 'China: The Uighur Dilemma', *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 28 July <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/content/2009/s2639008.htm> – Accessed 12 May 2010 – Attachment 4

⁷ Bodeen, C. 2009, '9 executed over China's deadly ethnic riots', *Associated Press Newswires*, 10 November – Attachment 5

⁸ Branigan, T. 2009, 'China launches "strike hard" crackdown in Xinjiang', *Guardian Unlimited*, 3 November – Attachment 6

⁹ RRT Research & Information 2009, *Research Response CHN35745*, 17 November – Attachment 7

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang's Protests*, October, pp.17 – Attachment 1

¹¹ RRT Research & Information 2009, *Research Response CHN35420*, 30 September – Attachment 8

were recorded in Urumqi, Khotan and Kashgar, possibly to gain attention for the Uighur cause on the eve of the Beijing Olympics. According to *BBC News*, during this time there were “reports of bus bombings and attacks on police stations.”¹³ As a consequence of these events, Beijing employed harsher language and responded with further restrictions on Uighur behaviour. Human Rights Watch suggests that as a consequence, Uighurs became synonymous with the ‘three evil forces’ of terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism in the eyes of many Han.¹⁴ Such a poor perception has led some Uighurs to suggest that they have become more susceptible to discrimination and violence throughout the PRC.

It is worth briefly examining the possibility of Uighurs relocating elsewhere in the People’s Republic of China as there are populations of Uighurs in a number of eastern provinces. A number of previous research responses have explored the issue of national relocation and the primary obstacle that has emerged in all of these reports has been the limits placed on internal migrants’ ability to access health and education services due to the Hukou (household registration) system.¹⁵ Relocation to the major cities of the eastern seaboard (Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, etc) is particularly difficult for non-Hukou holders; however, many centres do have small Uighur communities.

The other primary issue is the degree of ill-treatment Uighurs experience in other provinces of the PRC. It has been widely reported that the violent events in Urumqi in July 2009 began as a protest by Uighurs at the killing of two Uighur men at a factory in Guangdong province; “[o]n 26 June some 500 Han Chinese workers turned on around 200 Uyghur migrant co-workers, beating two of them to death and seriously injuring 61, on the basis of a rumour that some Uyghurs had raped Han girls.”¹⁶ A number of observers have commented that it was the apparently heavy-handed response to the peaceful protests by the Public Security Bureau (PSB) that caused the Urumqi protesters to turn violent. The accusations against the two Uighur factory workers turned out to be false; however, many Uighurs interpreted the events as symptomatic of the poor treatment of Uighurs by ethnic Hans both in Xinjiang and throughout the PRC.¹⁷

The attack on the Uighur workers in Guangdong does not appear to be an isolated case. *Radio Free Europe* reported in January 2010 that an ethnic Uighur man was attacked by a Han Chinese man in a Uighur restaurant in Shenzhen. The report states that the owner told the *South China Morning Post* that he has decided to return to Xinjiang “once police finish questioning.”¹⁸ Another report in January 2010 by *Radio Free Europe* states that throughout China there has been a “surge” in attacks against ethnic Uighurs and blames the public reaction to the events in 2008 and again in July 2009 on the language and selective employment of facts used by government propaganda and the Chinese media. *Radio Free Europe* suggest that actions have promoted extremist perspectives of Uighurs to emerge among many ethnic Han; “[h]ighly racist language is commonly found in Chinese discussion threads about ethnic violence last July in the Xinjiang regional capital.” Selective use of footage and facts on the deaths of Han Chinese are cited as portraying the Han as victims

¹² RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response CHN31450*, 14 March, q.7 – Attachment 9

¹³ ‘Regions and territories: Xinjiang’ 2010, *BBC News* http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/8152132.stm – Accessed 10 May 2010 – Attachment 10

¹⁴ Human Rights Watch 2010, *China: Events of 2008* – Attachment 11

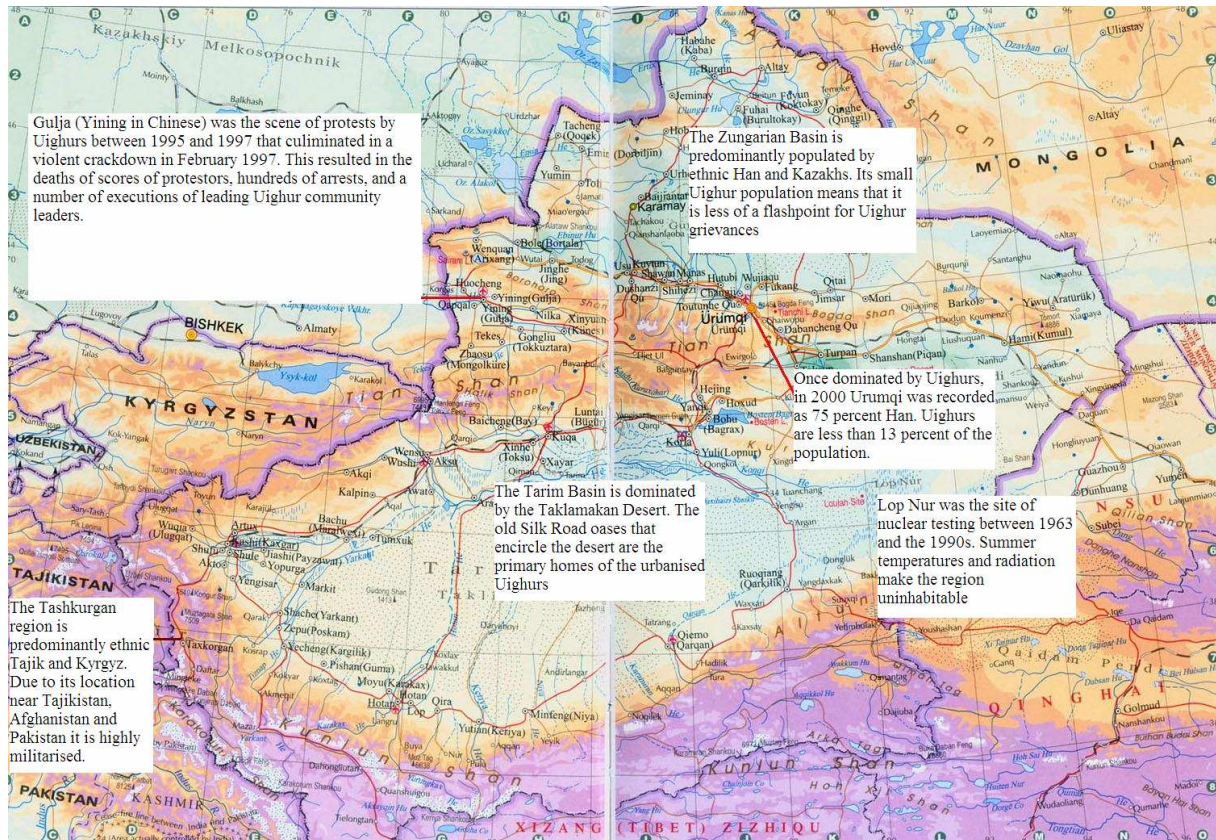
¹⁵ All PRC citizens are required to register in the district of their birth in order to access education, health and other services. Rarely are citizens able to transfer their Hukou registration, meaning that much of the PRC’s ‘floating population’ of over 100 million is unable to access such services.

¹⁶ Clarke, M. 2009, ‘China’s Xinjiang problem (part 1)’, Lowy Institute, 10 July <http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2009/07/10/Chinas-Xinjiang-Problem-Part-1.aspx> – Accessed 12 May 2010 – Attachment 12

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang’s Protests*, 20 October, pp.11-12 – Attachment 1

¹⁸ ‘Uyghur man stabbed to death in south China’ 2010, *Radio Free Europe*, 9 January – Attachment 13

rather than oppressors according to Uighur activists cited in the report; “[t]his type of biased reporting is igniting the hatred of Chinese people towards Uyghurs, and it is the reason for Uyghurs’ deaths in jails and on the streets”, states one Europe based activist.¹⁹



Map 1: Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region



Map 2: Urumqi to Turpan

2. Have there been any significant changes/events relating to the PRC authorities and Uighurs in East Turkistan in recent months?

As stated in the response to Question 1, the Public Security Bureau (PSB) began a large scale crackdown on Uighur activists in November 2009. This crackdown was supposedly designed

¹⁹ ‘China: Uyghur killing ‘not isolated’ 2010, *Radio Free Asia*, 19 January – Attachment 14

to target persons involved in the July 2009 riots and to 'hunt' for terrorists plotting violent attacks. At the time of its launch this operation was to last until the end of 2009; however, it appears that there has been no reduction in the level of security personnel, monitoring, and arrests in the first four months of 2010. However, a number of significant changes and events have occurred in recent months that could potentially affect the lives of Uighurs in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), not the least being the change in the administration of the province.

Perhaps the most significant event in recent months is the April 2010 sacking of Wang Lequan as chief of Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) after almost 15 years at the helm. Wang has been appointed to the Communist Party of China Central Committee as a deputy secretary of the Political and Legislative Affairs Committee; however, many China watchers have interpreted this as both a demotion and punishment.²⁰ A widely shared opinion is that Wang's approach to Uighur grievances over the past 15 years has been insensitive and confrontational; in 2002 Wang was quoted as stating that the Uighur language was "out of step with the 21st century" and soon after "the government started to shift the entire education system to Mandarin" and new controls were introduced on traditional customs such as religious weddings, burials, or pilgrimages to the tombs of local saints. In February 2008 new prohibitions were introduced on "23 types of illegal religious activities." Under Wang the ancient city of Kashgar, the prized jewel of Uighur civilisation, has been razed. Peaceful protests at such policies and destruction usually elicits a heavy response; "in March 2008 the authorities put down a large, peaceful protest against government policies in the town of Khotan."²¹

The appointment of Zhang Chunxian is being interpreted as an attempt by Beijing to refocus attention on the economic and social development of Xinjiang, in the hope of removing some of the grievances of the Uighur people. *The Guardian* reported that President Hu Jintao told the official *Xinhua* news agency that economic and social development in Xinjiang needs to occur "in a sound and speedy manner, with priority on guaranteeing and improving people's livelihoods so all ethnic groups in the region can live a more prosperous and happier life". *The Guardian* remarks that this new approach "is a marked shift from Wang's relentless focus on security, with its repeated 'strike hard' campaigns." The author of the report laments that despite the focus on improving the socio-economic status of Uighurs, "there is no sign that authorities are reconsidering cultural policies that many Uighurs resent."²² *The Age* commented in April 2010 that while "Mr Wang's removal is unlikely to lead to any reversal of his hardline security policies", it will potentially "break up webs of patronage within the security and business sectors and make space for new ideas on how to alleviate social grievances."²³ Beijing's faith in economic development as the panacea for grievances is consistent with the Hegelian-Marxist tenet that all conflict, indeed all history, is merely economic epiphenomena. It therefore remains to be seen if Mr Zhang's 'liberated' and 'creative' thinking will herald a change in Uighur/Han relations and greater sensitivity for Uighur social and cultural grievances.

²⁰ Branigan, T. 2010, 'China removes Xinjiang province leader', *The Guardian*, 25 April
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/apr/25/china-removes-xinjiang-leader> – Accessed 4 May 2010 – Attachment 15

²¹ Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang's Protests*, October, pp.10-11 – Attachment 1

²² Branigan, T. 2010, 'China removes Xinjiang province leader', *The Guardian*, 25 April
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/apr/25/china-removes-xinjiang-leader> – Accessed 4 May 2010 – Attachment 15

²³ Garnaut, J. 2010, 'Beijing ousts chief of troubled Xinjiang', *The Age*, 27 April
<http://www.theage.com.au/world/beijing-ousts-chief-of-troubled-xinjiang-20100426-tna0.html> – Accessed 11 May 2010 – Attachment 16

Another key development announced in the *China Daily* is the “almost doubling” of the security budget in Xinjiang. *The New York Times* reported in January that in 2010 “the regional government will spend \$423 million on public security, up 88 percent over last year.”²⁴ *Radio Free Asia* reported in February 2010 that Urumqi’s mayor Jerla Isamudinhe had announced that the crackdown on the ‘three forces’ of terrorism, separatism, and extremism would continue and that the city faced an “arduous fight against separatism now and for years to come.” The *Radio Free Asia* report states that a new force is being formed to detect terrorist plots and prevent contact between local and foreign “hostile forces”. Citing *Xinhua*, the report states that “more than 3,600 people, mostly former military personnel and university graduates, had joined the new force”.²⁵ Such reports do not suggest that Beijing and Zhang Chunxian are preparing to take a less confrontational approach to the Uighur problem.

In April 2010 *Xinhua* announced that construction had begun on a second railway linking the XUAR and Lanzhou. The new line, which will run parallel to the existing line, will stretch 1,776 kilometres from Lanzhou to Urumqi and is estimated to cost US\$21 billion and become operational in 2013. New trains on the line are expected to travel at speeds of up to 250 kilometres per hour, “cutting the journey from Lanzhou to Urumqi to 10 hours from the current 20” and shortening the journey from Urumqi to Beijing “to 12 hours compared with the current 40”.²⁶ The haste with which this project was announced and construction commenced suggests that it is to have a strategic security purpose, in addition to its economic and nation-building benefits. Lanzhou is the military headquarters for the entire western region (that includes Xinjiang) and the railway would allow rapid deployment of troops in the event of further major uprisings. The completion of the Urumqi to Kashgar railway in 2000 means that even the furthest reaches of the province are now rapidly accessible by trains of infantry and military hardware.

In the hours that followed the violence on the night of 5 July 2009 the internet, text-messaging and all international phone calls were blocked by the authorities as part of the government’s attempt to control the flow of information. At the time of writing many of these communication services remain partially or fully blocked. The only email service available is through the state-owned sina.com, domestic text messaging has been partially restored and international phone calls are now reportedly possible.²⁷ It is likely, however, that text messages, emails and phone calls are monitored. The state-owned *China Daily* announced in February 2010 that people in Xinjiang could now access 27 internet sites.²⁸ In December 2009 it was estimated that there were 234 million websites worldwide.

The trials of alleged perpetrators of the violence of 5 July 2009 have continued in recent months, and nine people have already been executed in relation to the violence. In addition, many young Uighur have been classified as ‘disappeared’; “[t]he victims of ‘disappearances’ documented by Human Rights Watch were young Uighur men—most in their 20s, although the youngest victim was 14 years old, and some witnesses reported that the police had detained boys as young as 12 during the raids... In most cases documented by Human Rights Watch, the men and boys detained in the course of these sweeps and raids have been missing

²⁴ Wong, E. 2010, ‘China Nearly Doubles Security Budget for Restive Western Area’, EBSCO, source: *The New York Times*, 14 January – Attachment 17

²⁵ ‘Urumqi’s winter of discontent’ 2010, *Radio Free Asia*, 8 February – Attachment 18

²⁶ ‘Works begins on new railway to Xinjiang’ 2010, *Global Times*, source: *Xinhua*, 16 April <http://china.globaltimes.cn/society/2010-04/522793.html> – Accessed 11 May 2010 – Attachment 19

²⁷ ‘Thorn Tree Travel Forum: Xinjiang Internet & Phone’ 2010, Lonely Planet, 2 March <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree/thread.jspa?threadID=1883611> – Accessed 11 May 2010 – Attachment 20

²⁸ Cui, J. 2010, ‘More websites back online in Urumqi’, *China Daily*, 8 February http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-02/08/content_9440855.htm – Accessed 11 May 2010 – Attachment 21

since the security forces took them away.”²⁹ Amnesty International reports that in August 2009 Chinese authorities informed the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that they were holding “718 people in connection with the July unrest and in December they announced the arrest of an additional 94 individuals who had been on the “wanted” list following the unrest as part of a “strike hard” campaign.” In addition, in March 2010 the governor of the XUAR “told journalists that 198 people had been convicted in 97 separate cases for their alleged involvement in the unrest” and that “several dozen death sentences had been handed down.” Nine executions are said to have taken place thus far. Amnesty International reports that in at least some of these trials proceedings have lasted approximately 30 minutes.³⁰ Such a lack of procedural fairness and the severity of Beijing’s retribution will do little to dampen Uighur grievances and reduce tensions in the XUAR.

Attachments

1. Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang’s Protests*, October.
2. Grammaticas, D. 2010, ‘Trekking 1,000km in China for e-mail’, *BBC News*, 11 February <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/low/asia-pacific/8506601.stm> – Accessed 4 May 2010.
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7. RRT Research & Information 2009, *Research Response CHN35745*, 17 November.
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²⁹ Human Rights Watch 2009, *We Are Afraid to Even Look for Them: Enforced Disappearances in the Wake of Xinjiang’s Protests*, October, p.6 – Attachment 1

³⁰ Amnesty International 2010, ‘Life Sentence For 18-Year-Old, Unfair Trial’, 20 April – Attachment 22

16. Garnaut, J. 2010, 'Beijing ousts chief of troubled Xinjiang', *The Age*, 27 April <http://www.theage.com.au/world/beijing-ousts-chief-of-troubled-xinjiang-20100426-tna0.html> – Accessed 11 May 2010.
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