

12 children hurt in raid on China religious school; state blames staff, activists blame police
By Associated Press
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BEIJING — State media reported that staff at a religious school in heavily Muslim far western China set off explosives to fend off a police raid and that 12 children were burned. An overseas rights group, however, blamed tear gas used by paramilitary forces for the injuries.

The Tianshan news portal for the Xinjiang region said the 12 were hospitalized after the raid Wednesday, but didn't say how badly they were hurt. Three police and two of the three staff at the school in Hotan city also were injured, it said.

Dilxat Raxit, a spokesman for the German-based World Uyghur Congress, said the school was teaching the Quran and that paramilitary officers used tear gas on the children.

"Both sides were involved in a clash and then authorities used tear gas causing injuries on both sides," Dilxat said.

Calls to the Hotan Public Security Bureau rang unanswered. The Tianshan report said 54 children were at the school when police raided it.

The Global Times newspaper on Thursday quoted Xinjiang government spokesman Hou Hanmin as saying the children were between 6 and 10 years old and had been barred from seeing their parents. Hou said upset parents reported the school to police.

The report said the school was on the fifth floor of a residential building and that fire destroyed much of the floor.

China allows only a small number of licensed religious schools, mostly at the university level. The government has stepped up a campaign against illegal schools in Xinjiang, a sprawling region that borders Central Asia and is home to millions of largely Muslim ethnic Uighurs (pronounced WEE'-gurs) who say they have been marginalized by China's majority Han.

Last month, courts in Kashgar sentenced nine men to prison terms ranging between six to 15 years for their involvement with illegal religious schools or religious instruction.

The sentences were announced at three separate public hearings in Kashgar on May 31, the Kashgar Daily reported online. The heaviest sentence, a 15-year jail term, was handed down to Sadike Ku'erban for inciting separatism by spreading "extremist religious thought and inciting others to wage a holy war," the report said.

It said he ran a network of illegal "home schools" in four different parts of Xinjiang over 10 years that taught 86 students, including 16 under 14 years of age.

An official with the Kashgar Intermediate People's Court on Wednesday confirmed the trials took place but refused to provide any details. Like many Chinese bureaucrats, he would give only his surname, Zhang.

China allows different faiths to practice their religion but only in state-backed churches and mosques.

Many Uighurs resent Chinese rule and controls on their religion and culture, and the region has occasionally seen violent unrest.

In July 2009, rioting between Uighurs and Han Chinese killed nearly 200 people in Xinjiang's capital, Urumqi. Uighur activists say the riots, which were followed by retaliatory attacks by members of China's

majority Han ethnic group, were the result of decades of pent-up frustration with Chinese rule. The government says it has vastly improved living standards in ethnic areas.

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