

Killings Stir Fears of Ethnic Tensions in Chinese Region
By Edward Wong
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BEIJING — At least four people were killed and eight injured in what appeared to be a knife fight in the city of Korla, a center of oil production in the western Chinese region of Xinjiang, regional officials said on Friday.

The outburst of violence on Thursday put local residents on edge over a potential flare-up in ethnic tensions, a common occurrence in parts of Xinjiang where ethnic Uighur, a Turkic-speaking people, bridle at what they call discrimination by the Han Chinese, who rule China. The police ordered people to stay off the streets in parts of Korla after the fight, but the authorities had lifted that ban by Friday.

It was unclear from initial reports what led to the dispute behind the violence — whether it was mainly rooted in ethnic conflict or primarily involved other matters, like money.

The fight broke out at a video game arcade and gaming parlor early Thursday afternoon, Li Taojie, a hotel manager in Korla, said by telephone. One version of the story circulating around Korla was that a young Uighur man had lost money at the gaming center and had demanded some of it back from the manager or owner, who happened to be ethnic Han, Mr. Li said. In another version, he said, the young man successfully won a lot of money from a machine, which upset the boss.

“We heard that the Uighur stabbed two Han people to death, and one Uighur died,” Mr. Li said.

The fight took place in what is known as the city’s “triangle business zone,” and the police cordoned off the area, Mr. Li said.

“At that time we were very scared,” he said. “Yes, I mean we Han people. At that time, we only knew that a Uighur had killed a Han, and we were panicked. We were very scared. But then we learned more, and everything returned to normal. It’s just a criminal case.”

An official at the Xinjiang regional propaganda bureau said Friday that four people had been killed and eight injured, but did not disclose their ethnicities. The official, who gave his surname as Li, said the police had detained one suspect.

In 2009, the worst ethnic violence in China in many years occurred in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, when Uighurs attacked Han in the middle of the city after a protest by Uighurs spun out of control. At least 197 people were killed and 1,600 people injured, most of them Han, according to the Chinese government. Uighurs said Han took retaliatory measures in the days after the Uighur rioting, and Han-dominated security forces detained many Uighurs.

In Beijing on Thursday, the Communist Party chief of Xinjiang, Zhang Chunxian, told reporters at a session of the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress that “although the situation remains tough, the overall stability in Xinjiang is improving and under control,” according to a report by Xinhua, the state news agency.

Using language typical of the party’s long-running propaganda efforts in Xinjiang, Mr. Zhang said the region would continue to oppose the “three evil forces” of separatism, extremism and terrorism. Uighur rights advocates say Communist officials exaggerate the threat of terrorist groups in Xinjiang in order to justify the use of repressive measures. Most Uighurs are Muslim.

Mr. Zhang also told reporters that Internet “rumors” about tense encounters involving Uighurs and Han threatened efforts at national unity. As an example, he cited Internet discussion about a fight that broke out last year between a Uighur street vendor and a Han customer over the price of a fruit-and-nut cake.