

# Violence in Western China Leaves 20 Dead

By EDWARD WONG

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BEIJING — An outburst of violence in a remote desert region of western China has underscored tensions over Chinese rule in ethnic-minority areas just days before an important national policy meeting here in Beijing. About 20 people were reported killed on Tuesday night in clashes in Xinjiang province in China's far west.

The tensions have been growing during the past year in ethnic Uighur and Tibetan areas, and violence involving security forces and civilians is becoming a regular occurrence.

Questions about the governance and security of those regions are expected to be raised next week during annual meetings here of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, both attended by delegates from throughout China. Delegates often discuss the most important political and economic issues in their provinces, regions or cities, though their ultimate purpose is to approve policy decisions already made at the highest levels of the Communist Party.

As with virtually all such events in remote parts of China, there were competing accounts of the violence on Tuesday, which took place in the town of Yecheng, known in Uighur as Kargilik. The town is populated mostly by Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking group whose members generally practice Sunni Islam. A report on a Web site run by the propaganda bureau of Xinjiang said on Wednesday that 13 people were killed and many others injured when nine attackers armed with knives stabbed people in a crowd on Happiness Road in the town of Yecheng. The police shot dead seven attackers and captured the other two, the report said. The attack began at 6 p.m. on Tuesday.

Global Times, an officially approved newspaper, reported that the attackers killed at least 10 people. The newspaper cited a statement it had obtained from the local government. Xinhua, the state news agency, reported that the police shot dead at least two attackers.

A man who answered the telephone at a police station in Yecheng said he could not provide any information. A local policeman told Agence France-Presse that a dozen attackers armed with axes attacked people in a market in Yecheng. The policeman said most of the victims were ethnic Han, though there were Uighur victims, too, and that the police had shot five of the attackers, who were all Uighurs.

Radio Free Asia, whose journalists talk regularly to Uighurs in the region, reported that a group of Uighurs killed three Han, and security officers then killed 12 Uighur youths.

"China's demonstrated lack of transparency when it comes to unrest in East Turkestan necessitates deep speculation of official Chinese claims," said Alim Seytoff, president of the Uyghur American Association, an advocacy group based in Washington. In his written statement, Mr. Seytoff was using the name that many Uighurs prefer to call the Uighur-dominated parts of Xinjiang.

The long-serving party chief of Xinjiang, Wang Lequan, was replaced in 2010, following a surge in violence in the region. Some Uighurs held out hope that the new party leader, Zhang Chunxian, the top official in Hunan Province, would adopt a softer line and try to examine the discriminatory policies that have led to the rise in ethnic tensions. But cycles of crackdown and violence have continued. Last July, clashes erupted in the towns of Hotan and Kashgar, which lie on either side of Yecheng County.

“Zhang Chunxian brought a new style, but the policies haven’t changed,” Nicholas Bequelin, a senior Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch, said in an e-mail message. “They were laid out at the Xinjiang work conference in 2010. These policies promised a rapid boost to the local economy — which has happened — but absent from this blueprint were the issues that top the list of the Uighur discontent: discrimination, Han in-migration and the ever more invasive curbs on language, culture, religious expression.”

Mr. Bequelin added that the one notable change since Mr. Zhang took office was a greater recognition that socio-economic discrimination against Uighurs needs to be addressed. “But not much has been done in this respect,” he said, “and the polarization between Uighurs and Chinese continues to grow.”

The biggest eruption of violence in Xinjiang in recent years took place in July 2009, when frustrated Uighurs took to the streets. The Chinese government reported that at least 197 people were killed and more than 1,700 injured, most of them ethnic Han. Uighur groups outside China say many innocent Uighurs were killed, tortured and detained by security forces.

Chinese officials often blame the violence on what they call “separatist” forces, and point to a shadowy group called the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. Uighur advocates say no such group exists; they argue that tensions arise because of Han discrimination and policies that put Uighurs at a disadvantage.

Edy Yin contributed research.

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