



# Human Rights Situation of Uyghur Ethnic Group

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## Rebiya Kadeer

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Ms. Kadeer was imprisoned by Chinese authorities for 6 years before being released into exile in the US where she resides since 2005. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, she has campaigned tirelessly for the fulfilment of China's obligations under domestic and international law that guarantee the religious, political, social and cultural rights of the ethnic Uyghur population.

## Timeline of Recent Events in Urumqi

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**June 26 2009:** Outbreak of violence at toy factory in Shaoguan between Uyghur and Han Chinese employees. Official figures report 2 Uyghurs were killed. The Guardian, a UK newspaper, interviewed one Han Chinese worker who personally stated he helped kill at least 7. The true total of Uyghur deaths is believed to be around 30.

**July 5 2009:** Around 2000 young Uyghurs conduct nonviolent protests in streets of Urumqi, requesting a governmental inquiry into the deaths at Shaoguan. Human Rights Watch notes the peaceful nature of the protest the following day. Chinese security forces were already present at People's Square upon their arrival. The police physically assault many protestors, causing many to flee to other parts of the city. Electricity is cut in some areas of Urumqi. Indiscriminate shooting and killings take place; gunshots can be heard on YouTube videos taken of the incidents. The dormitories at Xinjiang University are broken into by Chinese police. No investigation has been carried out to see if any Han Chinese deaths during the riots can actually be attributed to the indiscriminate shooting of Chinese security forces.

World Uyghur Congress estimates up to 1000 Uyghurs may have been shot dead that night. It is also believed that police arrested and removed several thousand Uyghur men from their homes under the cover of darkness.

Urumqi Communist Party Secretary, Li Zhi was quoted saying authorities detained 1434 people for compliance in the unrest. It is likely that this figure omits a significant number of illegally detained protestors. The Financial Times reports that 4000 Uyghurs may have been arrested.

**July 6 – 7 2009:** Han Chinese residents take to streets seeking revenge for acts carried out by Uyghurs. It was noted police did very little to intervene, in stark contrast to their response the day before. Radio Free Asia quote an eyewitness statement that between 150 and 200 Uyghur bodies were seen in a single district later that day.

**July 8 2009:** Urumqi Communist Party Secretary, Li Zhi stated that those responsible for the riots would be "sentenced to death". Amnesty international responded by drawing attention to the fact that only the courts have the right to make sentencing decisions.

On the same day, Professor Tohti was detained by Chinese authorities but his whereabouts remains unknown. He has publicly written about the dire situation of the Uyghurs in journals and on the internet.

**July 13 2009:** Chinese police shoot 2 unarmed Uyghur residents.

**July 30 2009:** State media report a further 253 arrests in relation to the Urumqi riots.

**August 3 2009:** State media report a further 319 arrests in relation to the Urumqi riots.

**August 4 2009:** State media report a further 83 arrests in relation to the Urumqi riots.

## Longstanding Human Rights Violations

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The unrest cannot be attributed solely to a trigger incident in a factory. Uyghurs have for many years faced employment discrimination, cultural and religious repression and have undergone torture, arrest and arbitrary detention. This was reported by **Amnesty International** just 2 months before the violence erupted in June 2009.

**Human Rights Watch** stated on July 8 that “the Chinese government has never admitted to human rights abuses in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region” and that such repressive policies have played a role in “creating the volatile atmosphere of resentment”. **Amnesty International** stated on July 10 that the Chinese president had “failed to address the serious human rights violations at the root of Uighur grievances”.

**Execution, detention, torture:** Since September 11 2001, the State authorities have aligned Muslim discontent with religious extremism, separatism and terrorist inclination to justify their repressive policies. As **Amnesty International** pointed out in April 2009, Uyghurs have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, unfair trials, execution and torture. Twenty two Uyghurs were detained in Guantanamo Bay for 7 years but released when all charges were found to be baseless. The **East-West Center** reported in 2004 that China had “exaggerated” the separatist inclination amongst the Uyghur population. Indeed, protestors in the Urumqi riots carried the Chinese flag to demonstrate they held no separatist aspiration.

**Religious repression:** **Human Rights Watch** issued a 114 page report on religious repression in the region in 2005. The report details how the State vets imams, imposes surveillance in and around mosques, forbids children to enter mosques or be instructed in theology, removes religious teachers and students, and freely associates dissent amongst the population as evidence of religious extremism and/or terrorism.

**Population transfer:** Central government policies have transferred large numbers of Han Chinese into the region. The policies provide financial incentives to Han Chinese to resettle in the region, denied to Uyghurs. The proportion of Chinese in the total population has risen from 6% in 1949 to around 40% today. Parallel to this movement, large numbers of young Uyghur women have been transported out of the region to work in exploitative factories in eastern China (**Uyghur Human Rights Project** 2008). This, combined with systematic attempts to undermine the Uyghur language despite protective provisions in the Constitution dilutes cultural cohesion and tradition and increases tension between different ethnicities living in the region.

## **Domestic and International Legal Obligations**

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China is a signatory to the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** which guarantees the right to hold and manifest religious beliefs. It also states that “ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities shall not be denied the right...to enjoy their own culture, to practice their own religion or to use their own language.”

Article 35 of the **Constitution of the People’s Republic of China** provides equal provisions for freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, of association, of procession and of demonstration. Article 36 proclaims universal freedom of religious belief. Article 37 declares that the freedom of person is “inviolable”.

The Chinese **1984 Regional Ethnic Autonomy Law** provides the right for ethnic groups to protect, promote and preserve their culture, and that students should “wherever possible” use textbooks in their own language which should also be the language of instruction.

Chinese law also demands that family members or work colleagues of a detained individual must be informed of the reason for the detention and the location of the detainee.

## **Media presence**

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A recent report by the Financial Times found cars carrying Uyghur passengers are searched at gunpoint, most likely to ensure no incriminating material in the form of photos/videos emerges from the region. International reporters were heavily monitored in the region following the unrest. **Radio Free Asia, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse** and **TV Tokyo** were expelled or detained.

## **Call for independent investigation/ Steps forward**

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On July 6, **Human Rights Watch** called for an independent investigation led by the United Nations to clarify events in Urumqi during the period of unrest. **Amnesty international** has also called for an independent investigation. An

inquiry into the release of different official figures of the numbers arrested also needs to be conducted. So far, no independent, neutral investigation has been conducted and the whereabouts of many detainees is still unknown.