

LETTER FROM EAST TURKESTAN

By Alim Seytoff

In 2001, after successfully bidding to host the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing with promises of improving human rights, the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) decided to use the occasion to showcase China's breathtaking progress to the world. The PRC's goal was to legitimize, solidify, and glorify the rule of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and to prove that it has finally become a global power worthy of international respect. With this in mind, Chinese leaders wished to present a perfectly choreographed Olympics, illustrating that all nationalities in China live in a "harmonious society" under the virtuous rule of the CPC.

At the same time, the PRC government, brushing aside all international criticism of its human rights record, also decided to take advantage of the occasion to further demonize its domestic opponents, justifying ever-intensifying nationwide pre-Olympic security crackdowns, especially in East Turkestan and Tibet, all in the name of Olympic security.

The PRC authorities have used the language of "terrorism" to justify the repression of Uyghurs since September 11, 2001, and have aggressively undertaken a renewed, systematic, and sustained crackdown on all forms of Uyghur dissent. This happened over the stated reservations of western governments and international human rights organizations. On August 1, 2008, one week ahead of the opening of the Beijing Olympic Games, Senior Colonel Tian Yixiang, from the Olympics Security Command Center, told reporters at a briefing in Beijing that the biggest threat came from "the East Turkestan terrorist organization."

On August 3, just three days later, Chinese state media reported that two Uyghurs, one taxi driver and one vegetable seller, attacked and killed sixteen

policemen using a truck, homemade grenades, and knives in Kashgar. The Chinese authorities blamed the East Turkestan "terrorists" for this attack. However, a September 28 *New York Times* report cast doubt on the official Chinese version of events.¹ The paper detailed the eyewitness accounts of three western tourists, one of whom had taken photographs of the attack, who were staying in a hotel across the street from the events. The *New York Times* reported that the three tourists said "that they heard no loud explosions, and that the men wielding the machetes appeared to be paramilitary officers who were attacking other uniformed men." The discrepancies between the tourists' accounts and the reports of the official media raise questions about the credibility of the information the Chinese government provided to the world's press.

On August 9, five days after the Kashgar attack, Chinese state media reported that fifteen Uyghurs launched a series of attacks in Kucha, killing one policeman and one Uyghur bystander. The state media said rifles and homemade bombs were used during the attack, in

which ten attackers were also killed and two were captured. After the Kucha attack, officials declared martial law in the region and strengthened the security presence. Police with machine guns and armored personnel carriers were seen in areas inhabited predominantly by Uyghurs.



An ethnic Uyghur walks past an Olympic poster in Kashgar, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, on August 5, 2008. Photo credit: Peter Parks/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Three days later, Chinese state media reported that on August 12, at Yamanya, near Kashgar, a group of men attacked a temporary checkpoint, killing three guards

UNITED NATIONS DECLARATION ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THE UYGHURS OF EAST TURKESTAN (ALSO KNOWN AS THE XINJIANG UYGHUR AUTONOMOUS REGION OR XUAR, PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA) (DECEMBER 2008)

China, together with 141 other countries, adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2006, marking an acknowledgment of indigenous people's rights around the world. However, the Chinese government does not recognize the existence of indigenous peoples within its territory. This new report by the Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP) analyzes the situation in East Turkestan according to the provisions of UNDRIP, describes how the Chinese government violates the provisions of the UN Declaration and routinely violates the fundamental rights of the Uyghur people. The report covers violations in terms of culture, religion, language, education, employment and other areas.

Full report available at <http://www.uhrp.org>

and seriously wounding one with knives.² According to Uyghur sources, these guards were young Uyghur villagers manned to check villagers' IDs at a country road. The identity of the actual killers was unclear, but their deaths were again blamed on Uyghur "terrorists." On August 27, in Peyzawat County near Kashgar, two unarmed Uyghur policemen were killed and at least two other Uyghur policemen were critically wounded in a knife attack. This incident was followed by reports that six of the suspected assailants in the August 27 attack were shot to death.³ Local residents, however, reported that the six suspects were shot after surrendering.

There was no independent verification or substantiation of the official versions of any of these attacks, save for local residents' accounts and the subsequent *New York Times* report that contradicted the official version of events. Foreign reporters were not allowed to enter the area and investigate what actually happened. Chinese police detained two Japanese reporters who went

to cover the aftermath of the Kucha attack, and deleted their photographs. Other foreign journalists were prevented from entering the area.

Following the attacks, Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan announced a "life or death struggle" on August 14.⁴ In his speech, Wang stated that security forces must "stick to a strategy of seizing the initiative to strike preemptively, closely guard against and attack separatist sabotage by the three forces and never allow our enemies to gain strength." Political Consultative Committee head Zhu Hailun stated at a televised news conference on August 18 that government forces must "Strike Hard" at the three evil forces [terrorism, separatism, and extremism], and mobilize the masses to guard against these forces at all levels of society. "Strike Hard" campaigns launched in recent months in the cities of Ghulja, Kashgar, Kucha, and Artush, resulting in the detention and arrest of thousands of Uyghurs.

Media reports also suggested that the Chinese government planned to crack down using military force in East Turkestan, including a report stating that "the enhanced military action would begin immediately after the Olympics end on the 24th [of August], when the world's attention will no longer be focused on China's human rights record."⁵ A report from the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy stated that around 200,000 public security officers and armed police had been mobilized in East Turkestan to "prevent terrorist attacks" on China's National Day, observed on October 1. The group also cited official orders allowing for the family members and even neighbors of suspected terrorists to be punished, in areas such as Kashgar and Hotan.

On October 21, 2008, China's Ministry of Public Security (MPS) issued a list of alleged terrorists who were said to belong to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM).⁶ (ETIM has been listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. at the request of the Chinese government.) The MPS sought to capture eight Uyghurs wanted for plotting "terrorist attacks" against the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

Beijing has also imposed unprecedented restrictions on religious activity.⁷ Students and government employees

were not permitted to fast or attend mosques during Ramadan this year. Uyghur-owned restaurants were also forced to open during fasting hours. Uyghurs are not permitted to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage, unless it is with an expensive official tour, where applicants are carefully vetted for their “obedience to the law.” Confiscations of passports, to the point where very few Uyghurs own passports, ensures adherence to the “official tours only” policy, and also restricts other types of international trips.

The 2008 Olympics will go down in Uyghur history as a time of national suffering and lamentation. After successfully hosting the Beijing Olympics, the CPC was indeed able to boost China’s national pride, enhance its international standing, electrify Chinese nationalism and strengthen its grip on near-absolute power. At the same time, the government was also successful in further demonizing the Uyghurs and cracking down on them more harshly.

Uyghurs around the globe urge continued vigilance by the international community of the Chinese government’s fierce repression in East Turkestan, and recommend that observers exercise caution regarding Chinese government propaganda. Uyghurs are now looking to the newly-elected U.S. administration of Senator Barack Obama to take a strong position on human rights in China, and to reverse the Chinese government’s little-known campaign of intimidation against a peaceful people.

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Notes

1. Edward Wong, “Doubt Arises in Account of an Attack in China,” *The New York Times*, September 28, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/29/world/asia/29kashgar.html>.
2. “Three Police Officers Slain in Western China,” *CNN*, August 12, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/08/12/china.xinjiang.attack>.
3. “Police Killed in New Xinjiang Clash,” *Radio Free Asia*, August 28, 2008, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/stabbing-08282008123309.html>.
4. Jane Macartney, “China Faces Life or Death Struggle say Communists,” *Times Online*, August 14, 2008, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article4528564.ece>.
5. Willy Lam, “Harsh Chinese Crackdown Coming in Xinjiang,” *Asia Sentinel*, August 15, 2008, http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1386&Itemid=31.
6. Daniel Schearf, “China Issues Wanted List of Alleged Olympic Terrorists,” *Voice of America*, October 21, 2008, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/china/2008/china-081021-voa01.htm>.
7. Edward Wong, “Wary of Islam, China Tightens a Vise of Rules,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/19/world/asia/19xinjiang.html>.