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China: International community must oppose attempt to brand peaceful political activists as "terrorists"

China's publication earlier this week of a wanted list of ethnic Uighur "terrorists" abroad and its call for their arrest and extradition appears to be a renewed attempt to curb the political activities of Uighur activists outside China and garner international support for its ongoing crackdown in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR), Amnesty International said today.

The official document published by the Chinese Ministry of Public Security on Monday listed four Uighur groups as "terrorist organizations". They include the World Uighur Youth Congress (WUYC) and the East Turkistan Information Center (ETIC). Both are political groups based in Germany which publicize reports of ongoing abuses against Uighurs in China and advocate self-determination or independence for the region.

The statement also listed eleven individuals as alleged "terrorists", including the presidents of WUYC and ETIC. All are living abroad and the Chinese authorities have called on other states to arrest and extradite them to China.

"This latest move appears to be a renewed attempt to silence the voices of Uighur activists abroad by branding their political activities as "terrorism", Amnesty International said.

The wanted list has been published amid a renewed 100-day security crackdown in the XUAR in the context of the government's ongoing repression of "ethnic separatist activities" in the region. The authorities continue to make little or no distinction between violent opposition and the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression, association and religion. China considers any advocacy for greater autonomy or independence as "ethnic separatism" which qualifies as a State Security crime under Chinese laws.

Several hundred Uighurs accused of involvement in such activities have been executed since the mid-1990s, thousands of others have been detained, imprisoned after unfair trials and tortured, and growing restrictions have been placed on the Islamic clergy and the practice of Islam in the region.

"Lumping together peaceful acts of protest with acts of 'terrorism' is a clear attempt by the Chinese authorities to whip up international support for its efforts to brutally suppress all forms of dissent in Xinjiang," Amnesty International said.

The call for international cooperation in targeting Uighur dissidents abroad follows China's attempts in recent years to put pressure on neighbouring countries to forcibly return Uighurs accused of "separatist" or "terrorist" activities. Several Uighurs have been forcibly returned from a number of countries, including Nepal and Pakistan as well as Central Asian countries. Some of those returned had been recognized as refugees.

In October, it was reported in the official Chinese media that Shaheer Ali, a Uighur pro-independence activist who was forcibly returned to China from Nepal last year, had been executed after being convicted in an apparently unfair trial of various offences including "separatism" and "organizing and leading a terrorist organization." He had been recognized as a refugee by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Nepal and was awaiting resettlement to a third country before his arrest and deportation.

Shaheer Ali was accused of leading the East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah, also known as the East Turkistan Islamic Party or the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). ETIM had been classified as a "terrorist" organization by the US and the UN last year at China's behest and was also included on the list published Monday.

Among other accusations, the Chinese authorities have linked this group to the Gulja (Yining) incident of 5 February 1997 which has officially been described as a "serious riot during which the terrorists shouted slogans calling for the establishment of an Islamic Kingdom." Numerous independent eyewitness reports indicate that the incident was in fact a peaceful demonstration by local people calling for equal treatment for Uighurs which degenerated into violence after security forces fired into the crowd in an attempt to forcibly disperse the protesters. Hundreds were arrested in the aftermath and many were subjected to torture and ill-treatment, including being hosed down with icy water which caused serious cases of frostbite.

While Amnesty International does not dispute that some Uighur groups or individuals may have been responsible for criminal acts, including acts of violence, the organization calls on other states to treat China's requests for extradition with extreme caution and ensure that the basis for such requests are given the most thorough scrutiny.

"Even if extradition requests are substantiated, the risk of torture and execution faced by Uighur pro-independence supporters in China means that no one should be returned against their will," Amnesty International said.

Earlier this month, Amnesty International issued an urgent action in response to reports that the US and the Chinese authorities were quietly discussing the return of Uighurs currently held in the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay. They are believed to have been taken into custody in Afghanistan in late 2001. The organization repeats its calls to the US not to return the Uighurs to China.

Public Document

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