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China: Remembering the victims of police brutality in Gulja, Xinjiang on 5-6 February 1997

Eight years ago on 5 February 1997, dozens of people were killed or seriously injured when the Chinese security forces brutally broke up a peaceful demonstration in the city of Gulja (Yining) in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) of China. Hundreds, possibly thousands, more lost their lives or were seriously injured in the unrest that occurred the following day. Large numbers of people were arrested during the demonstration and its aftermath. Many detainees were beaten or otherwise tortured and at least two have since died in custody. An unknown number of people remain in prison in connection with these events.

To date, there has been no investigation into the actions of the security forces and no one has been brought to justice for these abuses. The Chinese authorities' failure to address the impunity surrounding this incident facilitates the repetition of similar abuses in future and raises serious questions about China's commitment to "respect and protect human rights" as incorporated into the Constitution last year.

The victims of this crackdown were members of China's mainly Muslim Uighur community living in the XUAR. Over the last eight years, Amnesty International has obtained numerous eye-witness testimonies of the demonstration and its aftermath, building a picture which conflicts with official interpretations of the incident.

According to local sources, the demonstration was sparked by growing levels of repression of Uighur culture and religion in and around Gulja. This included the banning of traditional Uighur social gatherings, called *meshreps*, which were organised from 1994 in an attempt to revive cultural and Islamic traditions and to counter social ills such as drinking, smoking and drug-taking. Uighur community leaders in and around Gulja also organised local Uighur football teams in an unofficial league, but these were also closed down by the authorities and sports facilities were destroyed. Large numbers of Uighurs were arrested on suspicion of being so-called "separatists, terrorists or religious extremists", particularly during a "Strike Hard" campaign against crime in 1996, including alleged *meshrep* leaders as well as religious students and *imams*.

On the morning of 5 February 1997, several hundred young Uighurs, including women and children, took to the streets of Gulja holding banners, shouting religious slogans and calling for equal treatment for Uighurs. They were blocked by the security forces, including units of the People's Armed Police and riot police. Some sources have testified that a number of police then opened fire into the crowd causing serious injuries; others have stated that the police reportedly shot at the ground in the direction of the demonstration and that several people were injured - and some children killed - by ricocheting bullets. The police then rounded up and detained hundreds of people, who were loaded into trucks and taken to Yining City Police Detention Centre, also known as Yengi Hayat ("*New Life*") Prison. According to one

eyewitness, the trucks were packed so tightly that people had to lie on top of each other. Police officers reportedly sat on top of the detainees beating them with sticks. Some of those lying on the bottom reportedly died of suffocation.

"When the trucks arrived at the prison, the police threw the people out causing injuries like broken legs and hands. I saw one woman with an ear hanging off." (Eyewitness testimony).

In the afternoon, a second demonstration was started by friends and relatives of those who had been detained in the morning. Some of the protesters were carrying stones and threw them at the police. The police reportedly beat the protesters with large wooden clubs over one metre long and used tear gas in an attempt to break up the protest. Around 100 people were injured and some children reportedly died from the effects of the tear gas. Around twenty children are believed to have died as a result of the actions of the police in the morning and the afternoon of 5 February 1997 - some on the spot and others some days or weeks later as a result of injuries sustained.

Hundreds of protesters were again detained and taken to various detention centres across Ili prefecture, where Gulja is situated. The numbers were reportedly so high that all detention facilities across the district were full. In Yengi Hayat Prison, around 40-50 detainees were reportedly crammed into each cell, designed to hold no more than 10 people, leaving no space to sit down. There were not enough police to conduct interrogations and process the detainees, so other government officials, including procurators and court officials, were brought in to assist.

Many detainees were reportedly beaten in detention. In one incident in Yengi Hayat Prison, around 40 people were reportedly forced to kneel on the ground and were beaten from behind by police wielding wooden batons. On another occasion reported by several eyewitnesses, a group of between 300 and 400 demonstrators and residents detained on 5 February were hosed with icy cold water by some soldiers or riot police in an open place, possibly a stadium. The group, including children, were reportedly kept there, wet, for two hours in the freezing February temperatures. Some young men and women among the detainees were forced to run barefoot in the snow. Eventually those among the detainees who were suffering from severe frostbite were taken to hospital - some allegedly had to have their feet, fingers or hands amputated. The rest of the group were taken to prison.

Disturbances continued the next day, when thousands of people reportedly took to the streets to protest. By this time large numbers of extra police had been brought into the city. They reportedly went through the streets arresting and beating people, including children. In some areas, protesters reportedly attacked police or Chinese residents and shops and set fire to some vehicles, while the security forces reportedly opened fire on protesters and bystanders. The exact number who lost their lives remains unknown.

The Chinese authorities have officially described the unrest as an act of "terrorism". In a report published in the *People's Daily* in January 2002, the authorities attributed the incident to the "East Turkestan Islamic Party of Allah" (ETIPA) which was later named as the "East Turkestan Islamic Movement" (ETIM). At China's behest, ETIM was listed as a "terrorist organization" by the United Nations in 2002, although the evidence that forms the basis for this conclusion remains unclear. In February 2003, Amnesty International wrote to the Chair of the XUAR government, Ismail Tiliwaldi, asking him for further information to substantiate official claims of the involvement ETIPA/ETIM in the incident. The letter also requested that the authorities make public information about those who remain in detention in connection with the incident and to conduct an independent inquiry into all reports of killings, torture and other serious human rights violations which reportedly took place during the demonstration and the unrest that followed. To date, Amnesty International has received no response to this letter.

On the eighth anniversary of the demonstration and the brutal crackdown that followed, Amnesty International once again reiterates its calls for accountability, transparency and justice on behalf of all those who lost their lives, sustained injuries or remain behind bars in connection with these events.

For more information on the human rights situation in the XUAR, please see the following Amnesty International reports, all available at www.amnesty.org:

- *People's Republic of China: Uighurs fearing persecution as China wages its 'war on terror' (ASA 17/021/2004)*

- *People's Republic of China: China's anti-terrorism legislation and repression in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (ASA 17/010/2002)*

- *People's Republic of China: Gross violations of human rights in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (ASA 17/018/1999)*