

Uighurs deported back to China are jailed for life

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China has jailed two Uighurs deported from Cambodia for life, Radio Free Asia reported yesterday, showing no sign of loosening its grip on the far-western Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

The sentences — and deadly clashes this week between police in Sichuan and ethnic Tibetans — come at a sensitive time for China as it attempts to ensure stability ahead of a leadership transition later this year.

They also precede a visit to the US by Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping (习近平), who is seen as China's leader-in-waiting.

Cambodia, the recipient of increasingly large amounts of Chinese investment and trade, was sharply rebuked by human rights groups for deporting the asylum seekers.

Two days after Cambodia deported the Uighurs in December 2009, Xi visited Phnom Penh and signed 14 trade deals worth US\$850 million.

Radio Free Asia cited family sources and local authorities in Xinjiang, who in turn quoted jail notices they had seen. It was unclear when the sentences were handed down or what the men had been charged with.

The two Uighurs were among a group of about 20 who had sought asylum in Cambodia following ethnic riots between Uighurs and majority Han Chinese in Urumqi in July 2009.

Another of the group was jailed for 17 years, Radio Free Asia said, adding that the jail terms of the others were not known because court proceedings were held in secret.

“The imprisonment of these men, who were forcefully deported from a place of refuge, should

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serve as a wakeup call to the world about the brutal treatment awaiting Uighur asylum seekers who are sent back to China,” Uighur American Association president Alim Seytoff said in a statement posted on the group’s Web site. “The Uighurs in Cambodia were sent back to the very repression they were attempting to flee. We cannot allow the long arm of Chinese pressure to govern the treatment of Uighur asylum seekers in other countries.”

Radio Free Asia, citing rights groups, said the asylum-seekers had fled because they had witnessed Chinese security forces arresting and using lethal force against Uighur demonstrators during the riots that killed nearly 200 people, many of them Han Chinese.

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