

Angry protesters take to streets of Xinjiang capital

Written by Taipei Times

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Crowds of angry Han Chinese protesters took to the streets of the city of Urumqi yesterday to demand better security, less than two months after deadly unrest rocked the capital of mainly Muslim Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

Police ordered residents to stay indoors and stationed officers throughout the city, in a forceful response aimed at staving off a second wave of bloodshed following that in July, when nearly 200 people were killed.

Xinhua news agency said “big crowds” had gathered in several points across the city to protest a series of syringe attacks against members of various ethnic groups in the city. Shops and markets were shuttered.

The precise number of demonstrators was not immediately clear. Witnesses described large crowds, with some putting the turnout in the thousands.

Xinhua said that some Muslim ethnic Uighurs, who clashed with Han Chinese in July in the worst ethnic unrest to hit the country in decades, were among the protesters.

“There are about 10,000 to 20,000 people and many police in the street at every intersection,” a Han woman who runs a local medical clinic said, asking not to be named.

“There are more than 100 police stationed every 400m to 500m,” she said. “I heard there was a protest yesterday afternoon and I saw it myself today. They shouted, ‘Protect our homeland.’ Most of them are Han.”

“The reason for the protest was because people were stabbed by the needles,” the woman at the clinic said.

Xinhua said 15 people, whose ethnicity was not disclosed, had been arrested after attacking members of nine ethnic groups, including Han Chinese and Uighurs.

No one had been infected or poisoned in the attacks, the agency said, without saying when the attacks took place or how many people were hurt.

Regional Communist Party chief Wang Lequan (王乐泉) and Urumqi party boss Li Zhi (李质) both “called on the crowds, on two separate occasions, to stay calm and show restraint,” Xinhua reported.

Some witnesses said protesters had shouted slogans against Wang, demanding that he do something to put an end to the needle stabbings.

“I have shut my shop. I am afraid to go out. Many people are marching outside,” a female

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shopowner in the city's central Nanmen area said.

"The Han have staged a march so the police imposed controls and ordered us to stay indoors," Halisha, a Uighur eye doctor, said by telephone.

A receptionist at an Urumqi hotel said Internet access had been limited throughout the city.

It was not immediately clear whether the protests were still going on as night fell. One woman surnamed Bai at the front desk of the Dehe Hotel in the Nanmen area said the protests had ended, but other witnesses said they were ongoing.

Local and regional government officials were not immediately available for comment.

Foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu (江瑜) said she had no knowledge of the incident but told reporters at a regular briefing that China was "competent to safeguard social stability and national unity."

Uighurs say the July 5 riots occurred after Urumqi police tried to forcibly break up a peaceful protest over a brawl involving factory workers in distant southern China that state media said left two Uighurs dead.

China however has accused exiled Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer, who lives in the US, of orchestrating the unrest.

During a visit to Xinjiang late last month, Chinese President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) described those behind the unrest as "separatists" who were "doomed to fail."

Kadeer has denied any involvement in the violence.

Dilxat Raxit, the Munich-based spokesman of Kadeer's World Uyghur Congress, said witnesses had told him that about 10 Uighurs had been beaten and taken to hospital in the latest unrest.

"The situation is very complicated — we want the international community to send people to Xinjiang to investigate the situation there," he said.

"The Uighurs are in a terrible position, especially now that it's Ramadan," he added, referring to the Muslim fasting month.

A female office worker in downtown Urumqi said the situation in the city had been "very chaotic and especially serious" in the past two days.

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