

Rights groups condemn Beijing after Uighur journalist jailed for 15 years

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Human rights groups yesterday condemned China's jailing of an ethnic Uighur journalist who spoke to foreign journalists about last year's deadly riots in Xinjiang.

A court in Urumqi, capital of the far-western region, sentenced Gheyret Niyaz to 15 years in jail for endangering state security, the Uighurbiz.net Web site reported on Friday.

"We are utterly astonished at the outcome of this trial," the press-freedom group Reporters Without Borders said in a statement.

"In giving him such a heavy sentence and imprisoning other journalists and netizens whose sole crime is to have spoken about these events, the Chinese authorities are not encouraging a negotiated solution," the statement said.

Niyaz, who is also known as Hailaite Niyazi, was detained following deadly unrest last July between the Muslim Uighur minority and members of China's dominant Han ethnic group.

His arrest came after he criticized Chinese policy in Xinjiang in comments to foreign reporters.

Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), a network of domestic and overseas activists, released a statement saying Niyaz was denied a fair trial at the one-day proceedings on Friday.

"CHRD demands the immediate release of Hailaite Niyazi," the group said. "We believe he has been imprisoned for exercising his right to freedom of expression, and is being retaliated against" for comments critical of the Xinjiang leadership, it said.

China's approximately 8 million Uighurs are a Turkic-speaking, Muslim group that has long resented what many allege is Chinese political, religious and economic oppression, as well as unwanted Han immigration to Xinjiang.

That anger burst out in last year's violence — China's worst ethnic unrest in decades — which left nearly 200 dead and 1,700 injured, according to government figures.

Niyaz, a former reporter for the Xinjiang Economic Daily, was widely regarded as supportive of the Chinese government by overseas Uighurs, the Uighur American Association said.

But he had criticized regional economic inequalities and accused government officials of botching efforts to fight Uighur separatism, it said.

Niyaz was one of a number of Uighur journalists, Web masters and bloggers detained after the unrest, the association said.

"Gheyret Niyaz admitted in court that he accepted interviews from foreign media, but insisted

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that he had no malicious intentions and was only doing what a citizen, or reporter, should do,” his wife Reshalaiti was quoted as saying.

“Fifteen years imprisonment is an outrageous punishment for journalism that highlighted the longstanding grievances of the Uighur people,” said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International’s deputy director for Asia-Pacific.

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