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CHINA: Xinjiang religious freedom survey, September 2003

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In its survey analysis of the religious freedom situation in the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of north-western China (previously known as Eastern Turkestan), Forum 18 News Service reports on the pervasive state control over the religious life of native Muslims, who make up about half the local population. Mosques are strictly controlled by the authorities and all the imam-hatybs are state-appointed. Posters on mosques declare that children under 18 cannot attend, while an unofficial order bans employees of state-run companies from attending under threat of dismissal. Only approved religious literature can be sold. Despite Xinjiang's impressive recent economic growth, Forum 18 found that tension between local Muslims and the Chinese government has not been relieved.

The Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (previously known as Eastern Turkestan) is situated in the north west of China and borders Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Russia. With 16 per cent of China's territory, it is the country's largest province. According to official Chinese statistics, Xinjiang has a population of 16.5 million. Around half of the population is Chinese, while the other half speak Turkic languages and practise Islam. Of the latter, Uighurs constitute 42 per cent, the Kazakhs 6.2 per cent and the Kyrgyz 1 per cent.

Pervasive state control makes it difficult to collect information on what the state regards as the sensitive issues of religious freedom or relations between the Chinese state and Xinjiang's Muslim population. Almost all those interviewed by Forum 18 said that if the authorities knew they had supplied a journalist with "negative information", they could receive a lengthy prison sentence. For that reason Forum 18 cannot reveal the names of sources.

Historically, Eastern Turkestan is part of the same ethnic and cultural region as Central Asia. The people of Turkic origin who live here have a similar language, culture, customs and history to the native peoples of the Central Asian republics. In ancient times, the Uighurs were rulers of a powerful civilisation which extended not only to the whole of Central Asia, but also to China.

In 1759 the Manchu Chinese forces overcame the resistance of the Uighur army. The captured lands became known as Xinjiang (meaning "new border"). Since the incorporation of the region into China, the Uighurs have staged more than 400 uprisings. In 1944 the Uighurs even managed to seize part of Xinjiang and proclaim the Republic of Eastern Turkestan, but it survived only until 1949.

Relations between the Uighurs and the Chinese became particularly strained after 1950, when Beijing began the mass resettlement of ethnic Chinese into Eastern Turkestan. While in 1949 around 200,000 Chinese lived in the region (10 per cent of the population), today around 8 million Chinese live there (around 50 per cent of the population).

Since the start of the 1990s Xinjiang has had a powerful separatist Uighur underground movement. Acts of terrorism take place periodically and spontaneous uprisings flare up. In 1990 a bus was blown up in Kashgar, the main city in the south of the autonomous region, and again in 1992 in Urumqi, the region's capital. In 1990, when the authorities closed off access by believers to a mosque, an uprising broke out in the village of Barin (a suburb of Kashgar). In 1995, when the authorities sacked the local imam, an uprising broke out in the town of Khotan, 530 kilometres (850 miles) east of Kashgar. The most serious disturbances in recent years took place in February 1997 in the town of Inin on the border with Kazakhstan, 390 kilometres (625 miles) west of Urumqi, where full-scale battles between Uighur young people and the police raged for several days. The conflict left 55 Chinese and 25 Uighurs dead.

The Chinese government views Uighur separatism as a serious threat to state security. "Today you can criticise the communists privately, but to say anything (even within one's own family) in support of Uighur independence is to risk arrest," Uighurs told Forum 18.

At first glance Muslims in Xinjiang do not appear to be subject to any persecution by the authorities. You can see working mosques virtually everywhere in Kashgar. Forum 18 found that the number of functioning mosques in Xinjiang is much greater than, for example, in Uzbekistan, where the authorities are trying to limit the number of Islamic places of worship. However, local Muslims told Forum 18 that the mosques are strictly controlled by the authorities and all the imam-hatybs are appointed by the authorities. As in, for example, Uzbekistan, a religious community can only begin functioning once it has registered with the state authorities. In

every local district there is a state Islamic association that oversees the life of Muslims.

The Chinese authorities also control the distribution of religious literature. The owner of a Muslim bookshop in Kashgar, who preferred not to be named, told Forum 18 that the state had compiled a list of religious literature that was allowed in China. "If a book is found in my shop that is not included in that list my trading licence will be taken away immediately," the bookseller told Forum 18.

An unofficial order bans Muslims working in state-owned businesses from visiting the mosque under threat of dismissal. Forum 18 saw posters on mosques saying that anyone younger than 18 was not allowed to visit the mosque. Schoolchildren are also banned from going to school wearing a hijab (a traditional scarf worn by Muslim women that leaves only the face uncovered). "I am a Muslim and I have to wear a hijab, but we are not allowed to wear such 'ridiculous clothing' in school," a 15-year-old schoolgirl told Forum 18. "Every day I go to school in clothes that a Muslim woman ought to wear, and I only change into my horrible school uniform when I reach the door!"

Uighur officials also practise guile. As soon as they retire they start praying not five times a day, as Muslims are required to do, but 10 or even 15 times a day, making up for the lost years. It is worth noting that people acted similarly in Central Asia during the Soviet era, where many party officials became zealous Muslims once they retired. Chinese propaganda proclaims that educated people, such as teachers, cannot be believers, as this is a mark of ignorance. There was similar propaganda in the Soviet era when, for example, a student at a higher education institution seen attending a place of worship could be excluded from his course, because by visiting a religious building he had "shown his ignorance".

However, unlike neighbouring Central Asia, where today various radical Islamic groups are very active, such groups have not become widespread in Eastern Turkestan. For example, no Muslims Forum 18 spoke to in Xinjiang had heard anything about the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party, an international Islamic organisation very active in Central Asia despite being banned in all the Central Asian states.

True, Forum 18 has established that recently so-called Wahhabis - Muslims who adhere to the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam which is widespread in Saudi Arabia - have appeared in Xinjiang ("Wahhabi" is also a term widely used in Central Asia and incorrectly applied to Muslims who criticise the official clergy). Although the Uighurs, like the Muslims of Central Asia, belong to the Hanafi school, recently some young people in Xinjiang's mosques have been performing their prayers in the manner of Hanbalis of Saudi Arabia. Several local young people, like the so-called "Wahhabis" of Central Asia, criticise expensive weddings and funerals and the worship of mazars (the graves of holy people), because they believe such practices violate the laws of Islam. At the same time, unlike in Central Asia, no confrontations have been recorded in Xinjiang between the "Wahhabis" and the Hanafis.

Another point of similarity with the situation in Central Asia is the fierce hostility of local Muslims to the military action taken by the United States and Britain in Iraq. Virtually all those whom Forum 18 met believed that the US and Britain were guilty of the massacre of innocent Iraqi Muslims. Forum 18's sources regarded the US as the enemy of Muslims throughout the world.

It is worth noting that between 1983 and 1996 state officials and those under 18 were not banned from attending mosques. Local people told Forum 18 that Muslims experienced no persecution from the authorities during this period. It appears that in 1996 the Chinese authorities concluded that Uighur separatism had a clearly religious foundation.

This is partially true. The Uighurs are much more zealous Muslims than their Central Asian neighbours. The majority of local married women wear the yashmak (which is rare in Central Asia), while middle-aged men prefer to wear beards. Forum 18 often heard Uighurs say that their people "could never live peacefully with the Chinese, because most of them are atheists". A Uighur man, for example, will never go to a restaurant if the proprietor is Chinese, because the food is not prepared according to the rules of Islam.

The Chinese law restricting childbirth arouses great upset (although the Uighurs, as a national minority, are allowed to have one child more than the Chinese). "According to our Islamic customs, the more children there are in a home, the greater the happiness. The Chinese law insults our faith," Uighurs told Forum 18.

Forum 18 found that the overwhelming majority of Uighurs are strongly hostile to the Chinese. For example, in Kashgar a Uighur will never get in a taxi if the driver is Chinese, preferring to pay money to his compatriots. "When they found out that I was friendly with Chinese people, the Uighurs were so upset that they even wanted to beat me up. They felt that Muslims have no right to have anything to do with the Chinese," complained one Kyrgyz businessman who works in Xinjiang.

The hostility towards the Chinese contrasts sharply with the tolerant relations between Central Asian communities and the "Russian colonialists" in Soviet times. One of the reasons is perhaps that Muslim teaching recommends a more well-disposed attitude to Jews and Christians - the so-called "people of the Book" - than to people professing other faiths. Another reason is that in Soviet Central Asia there were no serious demographic changes similar to those in Xinjiang (Kazakhstan is an exception to this). In 1979 the percentage of Russians in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan was no more than 12 per cent.

Even as it tries to reduce the Uighurs' religious commitment, the Chinese government demonstrates a pronounced respect for their national culture. Teaching in school and in further education establishments is in Uighur, while there are Uighur television programmes and Uighur newspapers. In the Chinese army special kitchens prepare food for Muslim soldiers.

Every year the Chinese authorities hold competitions for Uighur children. The most gifted are given the option of attending prestigious colleges in eastern China at government expense. Once they have finished their tuition, the school leavers return to work in Xinjiang absolutely secularised and distanced from the Islamic laws and completely assimilated into Chinese culture.

At the same time as the government is trying to stamp out Uighur separatism, it is pouring money into this backward province. The economic progress is indeed impressive. When Forum 18's correspondent visited Xinjiang in 1994 the main means of transport in the towns of the autonomous region were horse-drawn carriages and bicycles. Today it has become commonplace for local people to travel about in cars. Even Uighur separatists admitted to Forum 18 that the standard of living in Xinjiang has risen markedly over the past 10 years.

However, while pouring money into the Xinjiang economy, the government is also trying to destroy traditional Muslim culture, Forum 18 was told. As an illustration, local people cited the example of the area around the historic Id-Kah central mosque in Kashgar. Six months ago this was a traditional Uighur district with many shops and tea salons where Muslims used to gather. Now the authorities have begun construction of a huge supermarket on the square in front of the mosque. The shops and tea salons have been destroyed under a city reconstruction plan. Speaking to Forum 18, local people interpret these transformations as a deliberate attempt to make the Muslim district conform to Chinese culture. For the time being at least, the tension between local Muslims and the Chinese government has not been relieved by Xinjiang's economic growth.

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