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China: Pressuring the families of Uyghur refugees

2012-03-21

Chinese authorities are confiscating the passports of parents whose children seek asylum in Europe.



Uyghur demonstrators stage a protest rally against China in Stockholm, July 9, 2009. AFP

Local authorities in northwestern China are pressuring the relatives of ethnic Uyghurs who are seeking asylum abroad, telling them to make their family members return home or risk losing their travel documents and the ability to visit them abroad.

At least 20 members of the mostly Muslim ethnic group who had escaped persecution in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and whose asylum status is under review in Europe have had police in their hometowns threaten to confiscate their parents' passports if they did not convince them to return to China, Uyghurs in Europe told RFA.

Almost all of the refugees had fled Xinjiang following deadly ethnic riots in July of 2009 that left around 200 dead, according to official estimates, in the region's capital Urumqi.

All of the refugees reported hearing about the threats within roughly the same time period. Most also claimed to not have been politically active in the local Uyghur community since traveling to Europe, aside from attending the occasional meeting or rally.

Some said local authorities in the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi and in other parts of the region had already taken their parents' passports and invalidated them with black stamps, ensuring that they could not be used to travel out of the country to visit their loved ones.

One 18-year-old refugee, who asked to remain anonymous, said he was surprised to hear that his parents had been targeted by police for questioning because he is so young.

"Yes. My father called me and said that police had contacted him and said they were looking for him," he said.

"Later he was taken to the police station and interrogated for nearly a whole day. Of course they tapped the phone, so my father would not say much about what had happened to him."

The refugee said that his parents had their passports confiscated and were clearly shaken from interacting with the authorities.

"I was told that they took his passport and stamped it right on the spot."

'No power to stop this'

A young Uyghur woman who is seeking asylum in Europe and whose parents experienced similar harassment said local police had visited her family home and cancelled her parents' passports as well.

"The police interrogated my parents for nearly one day and they weren't even let go for lunch," she said.

"They threatened my parents, saying, 'Bring your daughter back here immediately. Otherwise you will never see her again.'"

She said that since hearing the news on Feb. 20, she had been too nervous to call her parents for fear of getting them into further trouble, but added that she was determined to live her life no matter what happened.

"I have no power to stop all of this. Right now I am abroad, but as long as I am alive, I will see my parents again one day," she said.

"And it's not just me who must endure this situation. I won't let this hinder me from going to participate in Uyghur activities."

Another Uyghur youth who is living in Europe and said he is familiar with the situation confirmed that at least 20 other Uyghurs had been notified by their parents about being harassed by police in Xinjiang.

"The number that I am aware of has now reached 20. It's really a lot," he said.

"What is strange is that this happened at almost exactly the same time. How did the police get this information? That is what baffles me."

Local authorities at the refugees' hometowns refused to respond to RFA inquiries about the claims.

Forced repatriations

On July 5, 2009, deadly riots between Uyghurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang's capital Urumqi left 200 dead and 1,700 injured, according to state media. Two years later, ethnic relations remain uneasy in the capital.

More than 1,000 Uyghurs have been jailed and several thousand "disappeared" in the aftermath of the most deadly episode of ethnic unrest in China's recent history, according to Uyghur exile groups.

China often pressures the governments of countries where Uyghurs have sought asylum to send them home, where rights groups say they may face persecution, imprisonment, and even execution.

Authorities in Sweden deported two Uyghurs to China in January after their request for political asylum was refused, sparking fears among other Uyghur asylum-seekers that they would be forcibly repatriated.

Last October, nearly a dozen Uyghurs in the Netherlands were refused political asylum three or more times and were put under intense pressure from Dutch authorities to return to China.

They were among more than 50 Uyghurs from Xinjiang who had applied for asylum in the Netherlands.

Many of those applicants also said they thought the Dutch authorities were unaware of the gravity of the crisis faced by many Uyghurs.

In December 2005, a Uyghur seeking political asylum in Denmark named Burhan Zunun committed suicide after officials pushed him to return to China, highlighting the fear Uyghur refugees face of mistreatment at the hands of Chinese authorities.

Many Uyghurs have been deported in recent years from countries with strong trade and diplomatic ties to China, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and Laos.

Chinese authorities, wary of instability and the threat to the Communist Party's grip on power, often link Uyghurs in Xinjiang to violent separatist groups, including the Al-Qaeda terror network.

In October, Xinjiang courts sentenced four Uyghurs to death for violence in two Silk Road cities in July which left 32 people dead.

Reported by Mamatjan Juma for RFA's Uyghur service. Written in English by Joshua Lipis.

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