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Authorities in the troubled northwestern region of Xinjiang have begun keeping registers of religious believers, in a fresh move that appears targeted at the region's population of 9 million mostly Muslim Uyghurs, many of whom chafe under Chinese rule.



Uyghurs stand outside a mosque in Kashgar, Xinjiang, Aug. 3, 2011. AFP

Photos of such a register from the offices of the Bulaqsu township government near Kashgar city were circulated online this week, showing the assignment of various categories to those on the register, including "strongly religious but holds no religious office," "woman who wears a veil," and "person studying the Quran."

While repeated calls to the Bulaqsu township government offices went unanswered during office hours on Thursday, a Uyghur resident of Bulaqsu confirmed the report.

"Now they do," he said, when asked if religious believers needed to register with the government.

A second Uyghur resident of Bulaqsu also confirmed the reports.

"That's right," she said, when asked about the registration of religious households. "Yes," she replied, when asked if women who wore veils and men who wore traditional Muslim clothing also had to register.

"I don't [wear a veil]," she said.

'Priority surveillance'

The photos, posted on the Uyghur Online website, showed registration documents dated 2013, which categorized the people registered according to their beliefs and activities, as well as adding

key personal information about them, including their personal circumstances, level of religious knowledge, current attitudes and social connections.

The documents also identified whether a person was a target for "priority surveillance."

An official who answered the phone at the Shufu county government offices near Kashgar declined to comment on the reports, referring enquiries to the religious affairs bureau.

An official at the bureau didn't deny the reports, but declined to comment without permission from local leaders.

While residents of Bulaqsu confirmed independently the existence of registers of religious households in their village, China's special security provision for the whole of Xinjiang means that the practice is likely to be part of a region-wide strategy, observers say.

There are tight security restrictions in Xinjiang that don't necessarily apply in the rest of China. Exile Uyghur groups and residents say it's a separate and highly prioritized security strategy for the region.

The news of the registration comes as Kashgar recovers from deadly clashes last week, the worst single episode of violence since riots between Han Chinese and Uyghurs rocked the Xinjiang capital Urumqi in July 2009. The Urumqi bloodshed prompted a region-wide blackout of the Internet and cell phone coverage that lasted for months.

Meanwhile, a Uyghur resident of Hotan, another city in the south of the region, said the registration books covering religious believers were held by officials in every village, and that local people didn't know what they contained.

"Yes," he said. "They've all got them." But he seemed unwilling to comment further.

A Han Chinese resident of the regional capital of Urumqi, where nearly 200 people were left dead in the 2009 deadly ethnic clashes according to official figures, said the authorities were afraid that a strong interest in religion would encourage anti-Beijing sentiment among local Uyghurs.

"The problems mostly occur among the sort of people who are very religious, because their beliefs unite them, and strengthen their ethnic identity," Wang said.

"I think the government is trying to get everything it can on such people so as to be prepared," he said. "They are afraid there will be an incident."

Acts of 'terrorism'

Last Tuesday, 21 people were killed in clashes in Siriqbuya (in Chinese, Selibuya) township in Kashgar prefecture. Two days later, there were clashes in Hotan's Yengi Awat (Yingawa) village, leaving two people dead.

Police have arrested 19 suspects in connection with the Siriqbuya clashes.

Chinese state media and propaganda officials first said the clashes erupted when community officials were searching Uyghur homes for illegal knives and then said they stumbled upon "terrorists" watching 'jihad' movies.

Later they said some of the Uyghurs confronted by the officials were studying the Quran, the interpretation of which is strictly controlled by the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Then, the state media claimed some of the suspects allegedly were making explosives.

While Chinese authorities blamed the violence on Uyghur "terrorists," rights groups and experts familiar with the region say Beijing exaggerates a terrorism threat to take the heat off domestic policies that cause unrest or to justify the authorities' use of force against the Uyghur minority.

The Xinjiang government on Wednesday launched a new crackdown on millions of cell phone users, requiring anyone buying a SIM card for use with a cell phone to provide proof of identity and register the card to their own name.

Reported by Qiao Long for RFA's Mandarin service. Translated and written in English by Luisetta Mudie.