

China busts 'hard-core terrorists,' says arrests underscore enduring threat 1 year after riots

By Christopher Bodeen (CP) – 9 hours ago

BEIJING, China — China said Thursday its uncovering of a "terrorist" cell linked to a banned separatist movement in the country's far west underscored the enduring threat of attacks, a year after deadly ethnic riots rocked the traditionally Muslim Xinjiang region.

The gang had gathered pipe bombs, molotov cocktails, knives and other weapons to carry out attacks in southern Xinjiang cities between July and October 2009, Public Security Ministry spokesman Wu Heping told a media briefing. After the plot was revealed, gang members scattered to different parts of China and overseas, and authorities have arrested 10 suspects, he said.

Wu claimed the group was linked to the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, or ETIM, a banned organization advocating independence for Xinjiang. China says the group is allied with al-Qaida.

Wu left the briefing without taking questions from reporters and his assertions could not be independently verified. He did not say when the plot was uncovered or when the arrests were made.

The announcement came days before the anniversary of last year's violence, in which long-simmering tensions between Turkic Muslim Uighurs and majority Han Chinese migrants turned deadly in the regional capital, Urumqi, on July 5.

According to the official count, nearly 200 people died in the violence, which Beijing claims was plotted by overseas Uighur activists. The gang's planned attacks were apparently aimed at further inflaming tensions.

"The uncovering of this major terrorist group again proves that the ETIM and other terrorist organizations constitute the gravest terrorist threat that our nation faces at this present time and in the future," Wu told the briefing.

The claims were immediately questioned by overseas activists seeking to draw attention to Beijing's heavy-handed controls on religious practices and policies they say that favour Han Chinese migrants, fueling resentment among many Uighurs.

"China associates all Uighur causes with the ETIM, although no one seems to know what this group is or where they are located," said Dilxat Raxit, a spokesman for the Germany-based World Uyghur Congress which advocates a nonviolent approach.

Though Wu did not identify what countries the suspects fled to, he said three were among a group deported to China in December. That same month, Cambodia repatriated 20 Uighurs it said had illegally entered the country, touching off an international outcry.

The Rev. Marcus Ramsey, director of the Macau Interfaith Network that collaborated with other missionary groups to help the Uighurs escape to Cambodia, said greater transparency was needed to give the accusations credibility.

"There's no press freedom, there's no independent verification of these things so I think they have the luxury of being able to make these claims," Ramsey said in a phone interview.

Slides shown at Wu's briefing showed knives and what appeared to be pipe bombs made from black powder and ball bearings. Another showed a minivan and a four-wheel drive vehicle allegedly used by the gang, while a third showed a kitchen-like room described as a bomb factory in Xinjiang.

Wu said the group was behind a pair of deadly attacks aimed at disrupting the 2008 Beijing Olympics that reportedly killed 29 people, including 10 attackers. It swung into action again following last July's rioting, the worst communal violence to hit Xinjiang in more than a decade, he said.

The riots, and the harsh crackdown that followed, inspired a new generation of terrorist cells with only rudimentary skills but a strong desire to carry out attacks, said Singapore-based terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna.

"China faces an enduring medium to low-level threat from terror and extremism and that threat increased after the riots," Gunaratna said in a telephone interview.

The relatively unsophisticated nature of such operations reflects the immense pressure militants face from powerful, well-funded security forces. Unlike in Pakistan and Afghanistan, militants in China face difficulties in communicating and organize effectively and have no apparent access to firearms and military-grade explosives.

Liu Shanying, a security analyst at the official Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, called the gang's defeat a "major breakthrough in counterterrorism."

Counterterrorism expert Li Wei of the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations in Beijing, challenged that characterization, saying operations against terror groups had been ongoing.

But he said the announcement would serve as a warning both to potential terrorists and to the Chinese public.

"It also goes to show that just because things seem to be getting better, it doesn't mean that people can now relax," Li said.

Associated Press Writer Gillian Wong contributed to this report.

Copyright © 2010 The Canadian Press. All rights reserved.