

'Zealots spare public to boost cause'

Uygur militants hope to win legitimacy by attacking police, expert says

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The three deadly assaults in Xinjiang in the past two weeks mainly targeted members of the security forces rather than ordinary people because the attackers were trying to win legitimacy and draw attention to their cause, an anti-terrorism expert said yesterday.

John Harrison, of the Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, was speaking after the killing of three security guards by four or five Uygur assailants on the outskirts of Kashgar yesterday morning.

"Given the locations and timing of the series of attacks, one could not rule out a connection between the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and the assaults," Dr Harrison said. The movement has been declared a terrorist organisation by China, the US and the UN.

"As a short-term solution, the Chinese authorities can step up their security measures to reduce the possibility of being put under attack. But in the long term, they should address the political causes behind the violence," Dr Harrison said.

He said underlying factors, including cultural, religious and ethnic differences between Uygurs - the majority in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region - and Han Chinese, who are the majority nationwide, must be addressed directly before the issue could be resolved.

Another expert said the wealth gap in the region could be another reason behind the unrest.

"The imbalanced development between other areas and Xinjiang, as well as the southern and northern parts within the region, are underlying factors in the discontent among the local people in Xinjiang," said Li Wei, director of the Anti-terrorism Research Centre at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing.

"Objectively, this is an inevitable issue. The general living standard in Xinjiang is better than in inland provinces in 1986," he said, but economic development had been much more rapid elsewhere than in Xinjiang, resulting in a huge income discrepancy.

"When these hidden, unstable factors are mixed with religious and ethnic controversy deliberately by some ill-minded people, Uygurs, particularly the young, will easily be irritated and provoked to take radical action," Mr Li said.

Dr Harrison warned that the attacks might not be over yet.

"As long as the media converges on the Olympic Games in Beijing," he said, "such activities are highly likely to take place again."

Yesterday's attack came two days after attacks - using guns and homemade bombs - on police, a market and government buildings in the central Xinjiang town of Kuqa left 11 people dead, and eight days after an attack, using knives and homemade explosives, on border police in Kashgar left 16 officers dead and another 16 injured.

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