

China plans trial, tamps unrest in Inner Mongolia

CHARLES HUTZLER - Associated Press - Associated Press

A Chinese miner will face a murder trial in the killing of a Mongolian man, the government said Monday, as it mixed concessions with force to stop more ethnic protests in its resource-rich Inner Mongolia borderland.

Police mounted heavier patrols, disrupted the Internet and confined some students to school campuses in the regional capital of Hohhot and in several other cities where Mongols have joined recurring protests over the past week.

One witness said students tried to protest in Hohhot on Monday before being confronted and forced back by paramilitary police. The account could not be confirmed. A brief description of the protest was posted on an Internet chat site but was quickly censored. Police and other officials reached by phone declined to comment.

Ever more intense security has been ordered up over the past week in response to protests believed to be the largest to sweep Inner Mongolia in the past 20 years. The protests started after the deaths of two Mongolians in clashes with Chinese and quickly spiraled into calls for ethnic rights, placing normally quiet Inner Mongolia along with Tibet and Xinjiang as border areas troubled by ethnic unrest.

In signs of how politically sensitive the unrest is, Chinese official media have almost ignored the protests and an academic at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences said he had been told not to talk about it. Searches for the terms "Hohhot" and "Inner Mongolia" on Sina Corporation's popular Twitter-like Weibo service return the message: "According to relevant law and regulations, the search results are not shown."

In one of the cases that triggered the protests, the state-run Xinhua News Agency said Monday that the Xilinhot Intermediate People's Court will hold a murder trial for Chinese miner Sun Shuning for driving a forklift and hitting Yan Wenlong. Yan had led a group of 20 people on May 15 to a coal mine that locals said caused noise, dust and pollution and when they began smashing mine property a clash ensued with miners, Xinhua said.

The quick handling of the case comes after Inner Mongolia's Communist Party chief promised students in the city of Xilinhot that authorities would punish the perpetrators in that case and in one other — in which a Chinese truck driver hit and killed a Mongolian herder who with other herders was blocking coal trucks from intruding on their grazing lands.

Inner Mongolia, a sprawling area of pasturelands that sits atop northern China bordering the independent nation of Mongolia, has seen a boom in the mining of coal and rare earths in recent years. That has drawn more workers into the region,

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further degraded the grasslands where herders grazed their sheep and cattle and made Mongols feel their ethnic identity is threatened.

The complaints of economic exploitation and cultural alienation echo ones from places like Tibet and Xinjiang. But unlike Tibetans in Tibet and Uighurs in Xinjiang, ethnic Mongolians are a small minority, fewer than 20 percent of the 24 million who live in Inner Mongolia. In the cities, many speak little or no Mongolian, having been educated in Chinese school systems.

Students have been at the forefront of many of the protests over the past week and are also taking the brunt of measures to quell the unrest. In many cities and some small towns, students are being kept on campus to avoid trouble.

At the Inner Mongolia Technical College of Construction in Hohhot, a teacher with the Communist Youth League committee said party higher-ups now required the school report daily on conditions, and to head off trouble, about 7,000 students are living at the school.

"These students have been restricted from going out since three or four days ago. All the college leaders and teachers are working and living inside the college round the clock now too," said the teacher, who would only give her surname, Li. "The leaders and we teachers go around the students' dormitories at night to make sure that everybody's there."

To keep news of the protests and the security clampdown from spreading, Internet service has been disrupted or even cut-off for several days in some cities and towns.

"We lost access to the Internet. And there's no point in going to the Internet cafes since they have suspended business because the Internet is down there too," said a waitress at the Laozhuanan restaurant around the corner from government offices in Chifeng. She would only give her surname, Wang.

Phone calls to Internet cafes in Chifeng went unanswered.

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