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ASIA PACIFIC

Western China Region Aims to Track People by Requiring Car Navigation

By EDWARD WONG FEB. 24, 2017

Officials in China's largest prefecture, in the far-western region of Xinjiang, are requiring all drivers there to install a Chinese-made satellite navigation system in their vehicles, according to an official news report this week.

Police officials say drivers must install the navigation system by June 30. "The installation rate will reach 100 percent," said a report on Monday on the website of The Korla Evening Post, a newspaper in the prefecture's capital, Korla. The report was also posted on the government-managed website of Beidou, the Chinese satellite navigation system. Beidou is China's version of the Global Positioning System, or GPS.

The new requirement is intended to help the authorities track people in a region where violence sometimes erupts because of ethnic tensions. Parts of Xinjiang are home to ethnic Uighurs, a Turkic-speaking people who mostly practice Sunni Islam and often resent policies made by the ethnic Han, the dominant group in China.

The most notable burst of violence occurred in 2009, when ethnic rioting convulsed Urumqi, the regional capital, resulting in about 200 deaths, most of them ethnic Han, according to official reports. Officials responded with a harsh security crackdown. Other episodes have resembled domestic terrorism, and some officials say the attackers have connections to groups engaged in global jihadist activities, but they have not offered any evidence to buttress that claim.

The prefecture, Bayingol Mongol Autonomous Prefecture, is next to Urumqi, and

many vehicles that travel through it are going to or coming from Urumqi. Oasis towns with heavy Uighur populations lie to its west. The prefecture's population is 32 percent Uighur and 59 percent Han, according to official statistics, even though the prefecture's name implies that Mongolians are a significant population. (In fact, they are 3 percent of the total.)

Last year, central Communist Party officials appointed Chen Quanguo as the new party chief of Xinjiang. Mr. Chen formerly oversaw the Tibet Autonomous Region, which also has chronic problems involving ethnic conflict. Mr. Chen has tried to roll out more hard-line policies. It seems likely that he hopes to get a seat this fall on the Politburo, a top governing body in the party.

Nicholas Bequelin, the East Asia director for Amnesty International, said the requirement to install the navigation system was consistent with Xinjiang's "important role as a trial ground" for China's ambition to create a "world-class, high-tech counterterrorism force."

"While preventing terrorist attacks is a legitimate concern for the government," Mr. Bequelin said, "the kind of indiscriminate, quasi-totalitarian policies rolled out in Xinjiang" under Mr. Chen "are bound to create a deep pool of resentment that will indeed turn into a real time bomb for China."

In 2014, a series of bomb blasts in the prefecture killed six people, according to an official report. Security forces then shot people whom the report described as rioters. Forty people died, including some who blew themselves up, the report said.

In 2013, a Uighur farmer used a knife to kill at least five people and wound seven, according to an official report.

News of the navigation system requirement first appeared in a post on the official microblog of the Bayingol traffic police department on Feb. 4. The post said: "In recent years, the international antiterrorism situation has been grim. Cars are the main means of transport for terrorists and have become a frequently chosen tool in terrorist attacks."

Another post said that on Feb. 19, police officers met to discuss the requirement. After that, a post appeared telling car owners about the order.

Since then, all those posts have been deleted from the official microblog account, but cached versions were saved and are viewable online.

In the past week and a half, officials in Xinjiang have ordered paramilitary units and police officers to hold large rallies in at least three cities with significant Uighur populations as demonstrations of force. A report on the official regional government website said the rally at a central square in Urumqi involved at least 10,000 security officers and hundreds of vehicles.

Vanessa Piao contributed research.

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