

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Media Briefing

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China: Hundreds detained in connection with National People's Congress

China's parliament, the National People's Congress (NPC), is meeting for its annual session between Sunday 5 March and Tuesday 14 March. This is one of the busiest political events in China as thousands of high-ranking officials and legislators gather in Beijing to examine and approve the country's social and economic plans.

One of the key topics discussed at the NPC this year is economic and social improvement in rural areas, prompted by fears that the widening wealth gap between rural and urban areas is leading to social unrest in rural areas.

Rural issues

Rural protests have increased throughout China in recent years. Some such protests have been broken up by force by law enforcement officials. In some cases, violence and beatings have been carried out by local gangs, reportedly backed by local police or authorities. Few investigations have been carried out into such abuses and perpetrators have largely gone unpunished.

Amnesty International calls on the Chinese authorities urgently to take effective measures to prevent and punish such abuses.

Recent rural protests have focused on various issues, including excessive taxation of farmers; forcible seizures of land and housing by property developers backed by local government; and allegations of corruption or mismanagement by local authorities.

The Chinese Government has belatedly started to address such grievances. When addressing the NPC delegates on 5 February, Premier Wen Jiabao called the government's pledge to increase spending in the countryside a "major [policy] change". This includes review of the agricultural tax. He also suggested more efforts would be made to protect farmers from land requisition.

Local activists have played an important role in raising awareness of the concerns and grievances of rural citizens, yet they remain at high risk of arbitrary detention, torture or ill-treatment and other human rights abuses.

For examples of activists arbitrarily detained for defending the rights of people in rural areas, please see section under 'Individual Cases' below.

Detentions in run-up to NPC

Hundreds of people have also been detained in the run up to the NPC as the authorities intensified a crackdown on dissent – a pattern in China ahead of any major event.

On the night of February 28, police raided hostels near the south Beijing train station and reportedly rounded up more than 400 people visiting the capital to air grievances. According to the *Beijing Youth Daily*, 620,000 people have been mobilized ahead of the NPC to act as 'security workers', including security guards from apartment blocks and retired citizens. Police have stepped up surveillance of well-known dissidents and activists.

Amnesty International has called on the Chinese authorities to ensure that all human rights activists in China are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of arbitrary detention, harassment or other human rights violations.

Media crackdown ahead of NPC

In the lead up to the NPC, the Chinese authorities have also shut down several media outlets, including websites, which were seen as potentially critical of the government. These included the outspoken magazine *Bing Dian (Freezing Point)*, a weekly supplement of China Youth Daily, which was shut down on 24 January while two of its editors were fired. It was reopened on 1 March under tight restrictions, according to reports.

On 8 February the editor of *Gongyi Shibao*, a magazine published by the China Social Workers Association, was demoted following an article referring to translation errors in the English language version of the official Chinese Communist Party website.

A journalist was dismissed from the northwest paper *Xinjiang Jingji Baoshe (Xinjiang Financial Journal)* after submitting an article about 30 or so families who were living in the region's forests because they had not been paid since 2002.

Amnesty International has called on the Chinese authorities to uphold the right to freedom of expression which includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and which is enshrined in international law and China's constitution.

Individual cases

1. Hunger strikers

Gao Zhisheng, a prominent defence lawyer, started a series of protest hunger strikes on 4 February with the aim of drawing attention to the recent beatings and detentions of human rights activists and the lawyers who sought to defend them. Gao's licence to practise law had been revoked in December 2005. On 17 January 2005 he narrowly escaped an attempt on his life when a car with its licence plates covered tried to run him over. In recent months police officers have threatened Gao and his family.

On 4 February, Gao began by fasting for 48 hours and was quickly joined by others wishing to show their solidarity, who took turns in fasting. Several Chinese activists who supported or participated in the hunger strikes have subsequently been detained by police or gone missing. They include:

Hu Jia, a prominent HIV/AIDS activist, who went missing on 16 February. His family have contacted various government departments asking where he is detained, but none of these has admitted holding him. Hu reportedly suffers from hepatitis B and needs daily medication.

Qi Zhiyong, who has campaigned for the rights of people with disabilities, has been missing since 15 or 16 February. Qi suffered gunshot injuries during the crackdown on the 1989 pro-democracy demonstration, which left him disabled.

Ouyang Xiaorong, a 32-year-old computer programmer, has been missing since 15 or 16 February

after he arrived in Beijing to help Gao Zhisheng organize the hunger-strike protest.

Chen Xiaoming, a petitioner from Shanghai, has been in detention since 15 February. His house has been searched and his computer has been taken away by police.

Wang Lizhuang, a 48-year-old media professor, who had drafted an open letter on behalf of people evicted from their homes in Shanghai, was taken away from his workplace by police on 21 February. His house was searched and his computer was confiscated by police.

Mao Hengfeng, a Shanghai-based activist who has persistently petitioned the authorities about being forced to have an abortion and being dismissed from her job in 1988, has been detained since 13 February. She had also protested against forced evictions in Shanghai and torture and ill-treatment meted out on people, including herself and Falun Gong practitioners, at "Re-education through Labour" facilities.

Ma Yalian, a Shanghai-based activist who had protested against forced evictions and police malpractice, has been detained since 15 February.

Yan Zhengxue, a rights activist, has been missing since 12 February after meeting Gao Zhisheng. Yan's wife witnessed her husband being taken away by police from his home in Beijing on that day. Yan Zhengxue is a well-known artist whose paintings about his years in prison and other works have been exhibited both in China and abroad.

Yu Zhijian is one of three people who threw paint onto the portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square during the 1989 pro-democracy protests. In 1989 he was sentenced to life imprisonment but was released in 2000. On 18 February 2006 he was detained by police after calling for people to join in the protest hunger strike. On 20 February his sister received notice that he was being held in custody on suspicion of "subversion" pending an investigation.

2. Rural activists

Examples of activists arbitrarily detained for defending the rights of people in rural areas include:

Yang Maodong (also known as Guo Feixiong), 39, is best known for providing legal assistance in July 2005 to villagers in Taishi, Guangdong province, who claimed their village leader was corrupt and were trying to have him removed from office. After visiting Taishi village on 4 February with another lawyer, Tian Jingling, Yang and Tian were detained for 12 hours in a police station. On their release they were reportedly beaten by a group of unidentified men.

On 8 February Yang wrote an open letter to Chinese president Hu Jintao and premier Wen Jiabao, protesting against attacks on human rights activists and excessive force used by authorities in recent demonstrations in rural areas. He was detained the same day in Beijing as he carried out a protest hunger strike. He was later handed over to police officers from his home city of Guangzhou who escorted him back to Guangzhou where he was placed under "residential surveillance". On 22 February he launched a hunger strike to protest against being placed under "residential surveillance", and against the continued harassment of his wife and two children.

Zhao Xin, 35, director of the Beijing human rights organization The Empowerment and Rights Institute, has been detained since 20 February. On 17 November 2005 he was severely beaten by several men as he left a restaurant in Sichuan province. He suffered a shattered knee cap and needed 11 stitches to the head after the men attacked him with steel pipes and knives. Zhao believes the attack was precipitated by his involvement in efforts to rerun the election in Taishi village, Guangdong.

Amnesty International calls for the immediate release of all those detained for legitimately defending human rights, including the individuals above.

For more information

Please contact the press office in London on +44 207 413 5566 or Mark Allison in Hong Kong on +852 9267 2116.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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