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China: Internet users at risk of arbitrary detention, torture and even execution

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Amnesty International called today on the Chinese authorities to release all those currently detained or jailed for peacefully express their views or share information.

"Everyone detained purely for peacefully publishing their views or other information on the Internet or for accessing the Internet are prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said. "They should be released immediately and unconditionally".

In report launched today ("[People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China](#)" - ASA 17/007/2002), Amnesty International records the cases of at least 33 people who have been detained or imprisoned for use of the Internet. They range from political activists and writers to members of unofficial organizations, including the Falun Gong movement.

One of the longest sentences has been passed against a former police officer, Li Dawei, (see: "[People's Republic of China: State control of the Internet in China: appeal cases](#)" ASA17/046/2002), who has been sentenced for 11 years in prison for downloading articles from Chinese democracy websites abroad. All his appeals have been turned down.

Two of those detained for Internet-related offences have died in custody, apparently as a result of torture or ill-treatment by the police. Both are members of the Falun Gong spiritual movement, which was banned as a "heretical organization".

"As the Internet industry continues to expand in China, the government continues to tighten controls on on-line information. This has included the filtering or blocking of some foreign websites, the creation of special Internet police, the blocking of search engines, the shut down of websites which post information on corruption or articles critical of government," Amnesty International said.

In late August China blocked access to the Google Internet search engine for a brief period, diverting users to local search engines instead. In recent weeks, Beijing has shifted tactics again, opening up some previously blocked Web sites, but only for users to open documents on those sites that relate to China. The Ministry of State Security has reportedly installed Internet service providers to monitor individual email accounts and all Internet cafes are required to register and inform customers.

"Internet users are increasingly caught up in a tight web of rules restricting their fundamental human rights," Amnesty International added. "Anyone surfing the Internet could potentially be at risk of arbitrary detention and imprisonment".

In extreme cases, individuals who publish information on the Internet which is considered to be a "state secret" can be sentenced to death.

The Chinese authorities have also forced Internet companies to take greater responsibility for policing the web. A "Self-Discipline" was introduced in August 2002 under which signatories agree not to post "pernicious" information that threatens national security, disrupt social stability, contravene laws and spread superstition and obscenity". The pledge has been signed by major Internet companies including the popular international search engine Yahoo.

Amnesty International urged the government to review certain regulations and other measures restricting freedom of expression on the Internet in order to comply with international standards.

Amnesty International also raised concerns that some overseas companies have reportedly sold technology to China that is used by the Chinese authorities to censor the Internet.

"As China's role as an economic and trading partner grows, multinational companies have a particular responsibility to ensure that the technology is not used to violate fundamental human rights," Amnesty International said.

Background

Since the commercialisation of the Internet in China in 1995, China has become one of the fastest-growing Internet markets in the world. The number of domestic Internet users is doubling every six months and thousands of websites are being launched. The number of Internet users had reached almost 46 million and experts believe that within the next four years China is likely to become the largest Internet market in the world. Since 1995 more than 60 rules and regulations have been introduced covering the use of the Internet.

After a fire in an Internet cafe in Beijing in June this year, the authorities closed thousands of Internet cafes and allowed them to reopen only after installing filtering software to block Web sites considered "politically sensitive" or "harmful". This prevents access to 500,000 various foreign websites.

The report is available at <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/asa170072002>
and the appeal cases can be found at <http://www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/asa170462002>

[State Control of the Internet in China](#)
[China Annual Report entry 2002](#)

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