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China: Olympic countdown to human rights reform

*"By allowing Beijing to host the Games you will help the development of human rights": Liu Jingmin,
Vice-President of the Beijing Olympic Bid Committee, April 2001*

With 687 days to go before the start of the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government needs to work quickly if it is to fulfil its promise to the International Olympic Committee to improve human rights ahead of the 2008 Games.

In its latest assessment of the Chinese government's performance in four benchmark areas of human rights ahead of the Olympics, Amnesty International found that its overall record remained poor. There has been some progress in reforming the death penalty system, but in other crucial areas the government's human rights record has deteriorated.

"The serious human rights abuses that continue to be reported every day across the country fly in the face of the promises the Chinese government made when it was bidding for the Olympics," said Catherine Baber, Deputy Asia Pacific Director at Amnesty International. "Grassroots human rights activists -- including those working with residents forcibly evicted from buildings on Olympic construction sites -- are harassed and imprisoned. Thousands of people are executed after unfair trials for crimes including smuggling and fraud."

"There has been a renewed crackdown on journalists and internet users in the past year -- a fact that makes government commitments to 'complete media freedom' ring hollow," said Catherine Baber. "The current state of affairs runs counter to the most basic interpretation of the 'Olympic spirit' with the 'preservation of human dignity' at its heart."

Amnesty International has sent its findings to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), which has said it would act if human rights commitments by China were not upheld in practice. The organisation is urging the IOC to use its influence with the Chinese authorities and to speak out on behalf of individuals such as Ye Guozhu.

Ye Guozhu was forcibly evicted when his home became part of a site for development in preparation for the Olympic Games. He was sentenced to four years' imprisonment after he sought permission to organize a demonstration in Beijing with other victims of forced evictions in December 2004. Amnesty International considers Ye Guozhu a prisoner of conscience. It has recently emerged that Ye has been tortured in detention, including being suspended from the ceiling by his arms and suffering beatings with electro-shock batons.

As well as carrying out forced evictions from Olympic related sites, Beijing city authorities have decided that in order to clean up the city's image in the run-up to the Olympics, targets of 're-education through labour' -- imprisonment without charge -- should to be expanded to include 'unlawful advertising or leafleting, unlicensed taxis, unlicensed businesses, vagrancy and begging'.

"Gleaming stadiums and spectacular parades will be worthless if journalists and human rights activists still can not speak out freely, if people are still being tortured in prison, or if the government continues its secrecy about the thousands of people executed," said Catherine Baber.

"We urge the Chinese authorities to press ahead with its promises to improve human rights so that when August 2008 arrives the Chinese people can be proud in every respect of what their country has to offer the world."

Notes to Editors

Amnesty International is publishing regular assessments of four key areas for human rights reform in the run-up to the Olympics. These form a core component of the organisation's broader agenda for human rights reform in China. In this latest assessment, some of the main developments and recommendations are as follows:

The death penalty

Continues to be applicable to around 68 offences, including crimes such as tax fraud and drug offences. Eight - ten thousand are people executed each year, according to estimates by Chinese academics. No-one sentenced to death receives a fair trial: failings include lack of prompt access to lawyers, no presumption of innocence and evidence extracted under torture. Widespread extraction of organs from executed prisoners -- new regulations in July 2006 only deal with transplants from live donors. In a positive development, the Supreme People's Court is to reinstate its power of final review and approval of all executions -- hopefully leading to a reduction in death sentences.

Amnesty International calls on the government to increase transparency by publishing full national statistics on death sentences and executions as a step towards full abolition.

Fair trials, torture and imprisonment without charge ('administrative detention')

Hundreds of thousands of people are believed to be held in 're-education through labour' facilities and other forms of imprisonment without charge across the country. Police have unchecked power to impose sentences of up to three years for 'minor offences'. Those imprisoned at such facilities are at high risk of torture or ill-treatment, especially if they resist 'reform'.

Amnesty International calls for the abolition of 're-education through labour' and other forms of administrative detention.

Human rights activists and defenders

People are increasingly airing complaints in public: 87,000 protests, demonstrations and other 'public order disturbances' in 2005, compared with 74,000 in 2004, according to government figures. Activists, including lawyers and journalists, face severe obstacles in drawing attention to abuses -- they are harassed, arbitrarily detained and tortured. May 2006 regulations for lawyers tighten official controls and may dissuade lawyers from representing victims of human rights abuses at the local level.

Amnesty International calls on the government to change vaguely-worded clauses in the Criminal Law, such as 'leaking state secrets abroad' and 'subverting state power', which are often used to suppress legitimate human rights activities.

Media freedom

The websites of hundreds of international organizations remain blocked by the Chinese authorities and numerous Chinese websites have been closed down over the past year.

Police have detained foreign journalists on at least 38 occasions over the last 2 years, according to the Foreign Correspondents Club of Beijing.

Chinese authorities have intensified controls over Chinese media outlets in the past year, closing publications such as *Freezing Point (Bingdian)* and dismissing critical journalists.

Amnesty International calls on the government to release all journalists detained for their peaceful reporting activities and to ensure both domestic and foreign journalists are able to cover issues of public concern without censorship.

The full assessment will be available from 21 September 00:01 GMT at:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/engasa170462006>.

The President of the International Olympic Committee, Jacques Rogge, has regularly referred to China's human rights commitments when questioned publicly about China and the Olympics. On the BBC Hardtalk programme in April 2002, he promised to act if human rights in China were not acted upon to his satisfaction.

Public Document

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