

140/99

AI INDEX: ASA 17/31/99

23 July 1999

PUBLIC STATEMENT

China

Falungong movement detentions: Alienating and potentially destabilizing

The arbitrary detention and continuing crackdown against followers of the Falungong movement in China are a new example of the authorities' tactics of harassing detaining or criminalizing citizens who are peacefully exercising basic human rights. This crack down flies in the face of the Chinese government's commitments to increase social freedom and marks the beginning of yet another circle of stifled dissent and repression.

At least 97 alleged Falungong leaders have reportedly been arrested, their homes searched, and property confiscated in recent days. In addition, since Wednesday, thousands of Falungong practitioners -- mainly elderly women, gathering for morning exercises or to silently protest the arrest of fellow practitioners have reportedly -- have been detained in cities across North-east China, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Many were released after being transported by police to stadiums for "education" sessions, some having been beaten with electric batons by the police.

Falungong, devised by Li Hongzhi, now resident in the USA, combines elements of traditional Qigong breathing exercises, Buddhism, Daoism and conservative social principles. Adherents, estimated in their millions, are reported to include party members, prominent academics, and some military personnel.

The phenomenon first came to international prominence on April 25 when thousands of adherents gathered in silent protest outside Zhongnanhai - the central government compound in Beijing. On 14 June a State Council circular refuted rumours that the group had been declared illegal, but warned followers not to hold more protests.

On 22 July, the Ministry of Civil Affairs declared that the organization had not been legally registered and would be banned having "engaged in illegal activities, promoted superstition, spread fallacies, duped the public, incited and created disturbances and jeopardized social stability".

The Ministry of Public Security simultaneously decreed the following activities illegal and liable to prosecution: distributing or promoting Falungong materials or gathering to carry out meditation exercises to promote Falungong anywhere at any time; silent sit-in's, gatherings marches or demonstrations to protect or promote Falungong; fabricating or spreading rumours to incite social disorder, organizing or directing activities to protest relevant government decisions.

This directive includes blanket criminalization of the exercise of basic freedoms enshrined in the Chinese constitution and in international human rights treaties.

The crackdown comes during a nationwide "anti superstition" campaign which has been in progress since at least mid 1998. The official media has repeatedly denounced traditional practices such as fengshui - geomancy, and fortune telling. "Unauthorized" temples have been demolished, and adherents of charismatic or unorthodox religious and millenarian groups have been assigned without trial to re-education through labour camps. Their alleged leaders have also been sentenced to death or long prison terms for allegedly defrauding followers, "organizing cults to obstruct the implementation of the law" or duping female followers into sex as a "sacred summons", which is considered rape. The Ministry of Public Security laterly designated five major sects as the focus of the crackdown, including the Zhushenjiao based in Hunan, whose leader Liu Jiaguo was sentenced to death last month.

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