

CHINA: LABOUR ACTIVISTS FACE HEAVY PRISON SENTENCES IN GUANGDONG

Amnesty International today called for intensified international pressure on China to release Li Wenming and Guo Baosheng, labour rights advocates and prisoners of conscience, who are facing heavy prison sentences in the booming southern Chinese province of Guangdong, bordering Hong Kong.

“Li Wenming and Guo Baosheng risk being sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment or more, because of their support of workers’ rights - peaceful activities which the government deems “counter-revolutionary”, Amnesty International said. “Convicting and sentencing the two men on these charges, just over six months before the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, would further undermine confidence in the rule of law in Guangdong, and by implication in Hong Kong.”

The two men have been tried in Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, in November. They were reportedly found guilty of “plotting to overthrow the government”, a crime punishable by at least 10 years’ imprisonment under the Criminal Law. The two men had wanted to establish an independent labour union, and had spread information among workers about their rights.

The November trial in Shenzhen - where Hong Kong’s unelected Provisional Legislature will sit until the territory’s handover to China in July 1997 - attracted strong attention from the Hong Kong media. The trial was particularly significant because it involved defenders of workers’ rights, in a province with a very high level of foreign investment in the industrial sector and a high economic growth rate. The trial also appeared to some Hong Kong media to offer a measure of the Chinese authorities’ concern to appease worries expressed in Hong Kong about future respect of the rule of law by China. Also, the trial was the first openly political one in Guangdong province since 1993.

In a rare move, the authorities did not announce the court’s verdict at the end of the trial - possibly as a result of the pressure exerted on the government at that time. Amnesty International renews its call on China to release the two men immediately and unconditionally. It also urges other governments to express concern to the Chinese Government that the continue detention of the two activists would have a negative impact on the human rights record in Guangdong province.

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