

AI Index: PRE 01/072/2011
21 February 2011

Chinese crackdown displays anxiety about Middle Eastern protests

Amnesty International today urged the Chinese authorities to stop detaining and harassing more than one hundred activists targeted in an apparent attempt to block anti-government demonstrations inspired by protests across the Middle East.

More than a dozen prominent human rights lawyers were among those detained or placed under various forms of house arrest or surveillance. The crackdown followed an anonymous call that spread via social media to mount a Chinese version of the “Jasmine revolution” in Tunisia.

“This wave of detentions is deeply disturbing and appears to be a fearful, misguided reaction to events in North Africa and the Middle East,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific director.

“The Chinese government seems to think it can simply flout the law and lock up anyone who might even be thinking about criticizing its policies. This is an unsettling trend, and one that is only getting worse.”

On 17 February, the US-based news site Boxun reported an anonymous appeal for Chinese to stage protests across the country on 20 February.

News of the appeal spread quickly via Twitter and blogs, urging protesters to proclaim: “We want food, we want work, we want housing, we want fairness.”

Families and friends of those targeted say they suspect the crackdown is a response to the call to protest, though police have offered no explanation.

“Arresting people who have committed no crime will only undermine stability by sowing mistrust and spreading fear,” Sam Zarifi said.

“We hope the Chinese leaders will end this crackdown and begin engaging their citizens in constructive and peaceful debate about how to improve the lives of all Chinese.”

Some of the targeted lawyers had gathered in Beijing last week to discuss the case of Chen Guangcheng, a former prisoner of conscience who recently released a secretly filmed video describing his family’s ongoing illegal house arrest.

The lawyers also discussed ways to address the government’s practice of placing released prisoners under illegal house arrest.

One Beijing lawyer, Tang Jitian, was arrested shortly after the meeting on 16 February and has not yet been released.

It appears the Boxun report caused authorities to further clamp down on anyone who may have been tempted to speak out.

Police detained lawyer Jiang Tianyong on Saturday from his brother's house and his family has had no direct contact with him since. Later that night, police returned to the house and confiscated a computer, as well as some personal belongings.

Police told the family they were holding Jiang Tianyong in connection with a crime but did not elaborate on his whereabouts or provide any legal documents.

Beijing legal scholar Teng Biao and activist Gu Chuan were also detained over the weekend, as were Sichuan-based internet activists Chen Wei and Ran Yunfei. None have been released.

Other prominent human rights lawyers, including Li Fangping and Xu Zhiyong, are under police surveillance.