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China: End the harassment of Sichuan earthquake survivors and activists

The Chinese authorities intimidated and unlawfully detained parents and relatives of children who died in the devastating Sichuan earthquake and harassed activists and lawyers who tried to assist them says a new Amnesty International report released on the anniversary of the disaster.

Amnesty International's report *Justice Denied: Harassment of Sichuan earthquake survivors and activists* documents instances where some parents and relatives were detained for up to 21 days for trying to seek answers from officials about why their children died. Some have been detained repeatedly and the youngest detainee was only eight years old.

“By unlawfully locking up parents of children who died, the government is creating more misery for people who have said in some cases they lost everything in the Sichuan Earthquake,” said Roseann Rife Amnesty International Asia-Pacific Deputy Program Director. “The government of China must cease harassing earthquake survivors who are seeking answers and trying to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives.”

Amnesty International's report found that in some cases the authorities had prevented parents and relatives from complaining to higher officials about the quality of the buildings that collapsed in the earthquake and many were subjected to arbitrary detention or unlawful surveillance to prevent them from pursuing legal remedies.

Some activists who offered assistance and representatives of parents are facing politically-motivated trials for vaguely defined state security and public order maintenance crimes.

The authorities have also denied grieving parents access to courts to determine who should bear the responsibility for the collapse of the schools and the deaths of their children. In a directive issued by the provincial court in Sichuan province, all lower courts are banned from accepting cases deemed sensitive, including disputes over compensation for personal injuries or damages to property caused by the collapse of buildings, and disputes over compensation by insurance companies until further instructions are given by relevant departments.

“The human toll of the Sichuan earthquake was incalculable but authorities need to do everything in their power to protect the rights of the survivors and stop the unlawful detentions as well as allow lawyers and civil society to pursue their important functions of accountability,” said Roseann Rife.

Amnesty International calls on the Chinese authorities to take immediate action to ensure the justice system works for parents and survivors by allowing them unhindered access to independent and impartial tribunals and lawyers and activists who have offered assistance.

The report Justice denied: Harassment of Sichuan earthquake survivors and activists includes interviews with parents whose children died during the earthquake, lawyers, legal experts, scholars and rights activists and English translations of circulars issued by Sichuan Higher People's Court instructing lower courts not to accept earthquake-related cases which are deemed sensitive.

To view the full report Justice Denied: Harassment of Sichuan earthquake survivors and activists click on the link below:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ASA17/018/2009/en>