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“CHINA: NO ONE IS SAFE”

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FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB OF JAPAN

(CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY)

Today marks the launch by Amnesty International's Japanese Section of our campaign against the systematic violation of human rights in China.

The year-long actions here in Japan will be part of our worldwide campaigning work, which kicked off last week with the release of a major report. This report details massive human rights violations in the country and makes it clear that - in China - no one is safe.

We said to the Chinese government: “we want to talk to you about the need for change.” Sadly, we have been met by a closed door.

The Chinese government has responded publicly by saying that our campaign is not even worth refutation. But behind the scenes, the truth is very different.

The Chinese government is acutely sensitive on human rights and will go to any lengths to block criticism and scrutiny of its appalling record. It seeks to silence organizations like Amnesty International and other critics. Sadly, other governments fall into line.

Amnesty International delegates in Bangkok were detained by the Thai police and prevented from attending our press conference to launch the campaign.

Later the same day Thai riot police formed a human wall to “protect” the Chinese Embassy in Bangkok from peaceful Amnesty members.

Amnesty members in Nepal were detained yesterday merely for handing out leaflets about our campaign. They have also been threatened with detention if they demonstrate about human rights violations in China outside the Chinese Embassy in a couple of hours.

The Chinese government is not content with silencing those who speak up in China. Their message is loud and clear: no discussion about our human rights record. Anywhere, by anyone, at any time.

Amnesty International is prepared to stand up to attempts to silence us. What about governments?

Today, in Geneva, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights will begin to scrutinize the state of human rights internationally. Governments around the world are deciding whether that scrutiny should extend to China.

At the same time, the Chinese government is pulling out all the stops in an attempt to block the Commission passing a resolution critical of China.

Will these governments listen to what the people of China want? Or will the politicians fudge some backroom deal, out of the sight of the millions to whom they are accountable?

Recently, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary detentions stated his concern about violations of the right to life in China.

The UN Committee against Torture has voiced its concerns about patterns of torture in China.

The Commission's own Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has concluded that prisoners have been arbitrarily detained in violation of international human rights standards.

Yet governments still waver in voting for that resolution at the Commission.

At the moment, France and Germany appear not to support a resolution on China. They may even be prepared to break with other European Union governments who want the Commission to act.

Premier Li Peng is due to visit France in April. What conclusions can we draw from this?

That the French government is more concerned with selling Airbus air planes than stopping women being given forced abortions or raped in custody?

That the German government is more concerned with selling cars than stopping Tibetan nuns from being tortured?

Will the European Union water down its position to the lowest common denominator, rather than taking a principled stand for the human rights of 1.2 billion people?

Here in Japan, the government has said that it wants a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. What kind of international leadership will Japan show if it is prepared to toe the Chinese line and exercise self-censorship when it comes areas of legitimate international concern?

We look to the Japanese government for consistency in its stand on human rights, at the UN Commission and at other times.

Last year Japan co-sponsored a resolution at the commission condemning China's human rights record. China's human rights record has not changed. Japan's stand should remain firm.

The government has cut its aid to Haiti, Nigeria and Sudan in protest at their human rights violations, but the same cannot be said about its approach to China.

Here in Japan we have been confronted with many justifications for the lack of action on human rights violations in China. But these excuses simply do not hold water.

We have been told that Japan has no moral right to condemn abuses elsewhere because of atrocities carried out by the army in the past and because of its treatment of comfort women.

Shrinking from criticism of China out of guilt neither redresses the past nor addresses the present violations of the most basic rights of the Chinese people.

Making sure that the Chinese people do not suffer atrocities today is surely the only morally supportable approach. Silence in the face of forced sterilizations for women, grotesque torture, and rising rates of executions will not alleviate Japan's guilt. Silence will serve only to perpetuate responsibility for continuing abuses.

We have also been told that public condemnation of human rights abuses will endanger Japan's economic relations with China. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Abuse of laws by officials, manipulation of the courts by politicians, and the inherent widespread corruption pose the real threat to a safe and secure business environment.

We have been told that quiet diplomacy will work where public confrontation does not. Where, I ask, is the proof that talking behind closed doors stops dissidents being thrown behind bars. Certainly not in China or Indonesia or Myanmar.

What message does this weakness send to the Chinese government?

It sends the message that the international community is not serious about protecting the rights of a fifth of humanity.

That the Chinese authorities can continue to torture with impunity; continue to detain hundreds of thousands of people each year without charging them with any offence; continue to execute more and more people every year after blatantly unfair trials; and continue to brutally crack down on anyone it sees as a threat to the established order.

More importantly, what message does this send to the people of China?

The message that no one is safe.

That Japan is more interested in making money than protecting people.

The other response by the Chinese government is to reject Amnesty's concerns, saying that Western and Eastern countries have different concepts of human rights.

This is just a smokescreen. Put up by a government trying to legitimise the human rights violations they commit in the name of power.

This is not the view of the people of Asia themselves.

Ask Asian people about their view of human rights. Ask the victims. Ask the human rights defenders in Asia, from Korea to Indonesia. Ask Amnesty's many Asian members from Nepal to Japan. Pain and terror do not differ from culture to culture.

Do the parents of a man executed after an unfair trial think that this is part of an Asian cultural tradition?

Does the woman repeatedly tortured with an electric shock baton agree that this is something that is justifiable because she is Asian?

But something can be done to help Chinese citizens persuade their government to stop violating their human rights.

China needs Japan. It needs its capital, its technology, its resources.

In areas such as trade and security, Japan has made it clear to China that its engagement with the world carries with it responsibilities and obligations. The same must be demanded in the area of human rights.

There is a glimmer of hope that if Japan stands firm, it can make a difference.

The government, businesses, the media and individuals here in Japan can make that difference.

Amnesty International is calling on governments to speak up for those people in China who aren't allowed to speak up themselves. To support and encourage the debate that is going on in China on the need for reform and change.

On Japanese businesses to use their enormous influence as an agent for change.

On the Japanese media not to exercise self-restraint in covering human rights violations in China.

On Japanese non-governmental organizations to extend their campaigning for comfort women to the plight of women in China who are today suffering human rights violations.

And on people here in Japan and around the world to join us in our campaign.