

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FORUM-ASIA

AI INDEX: ASA 17/86/96

News Service 155/96

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE 0400 HRS GMT 30 AUGUST 1996

INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA – MANILA 1996 Organized by Amnesty International and Forum-Asia

MANILA -Those who dare to speak up for justice or denounce repression in China and throughout Asia increasingly face torture, imprisonment and even death at the hands of governments which claim that Asians have limited claims to these basic and fundamental human rights.

This was the message from the inauguration in Manila of an international conference on human rights, jointly organized by Amnesty International and the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA). More than 100 participants from 60 international and regional non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are taking part in the Forum.

“Human rights are universal, they are the right of every man, woman and child throughout the world, and no government can claim that these rights are somehow diminished because of the colour of a person’s skin or the country of their birth,” said Ross Daniels, Chair of Amnesty International’s International Executive Committee, in his opening address.

“In a phenomenon all too common in Asia, restrictions are imposed on basic freedoms, such as the right to freedom of association and expression, in the name of stability and economic development,” said Somchai Homlaor, Secretary General of FORUM-ASIA. “Many governments have tried to muzzle all forms of peaceful political dissent, whether it be trade unions, labour organizations, peasants' organizations, student unions, professional associations or non-governmental organizations.”

Representatives from local, regional and international organizations are gathered for the three-day (30 August-1 September) Forum in Manila, entitled *Towards Upholding Universality*. The conference focuses on human rights violations in China and what can be done to help those who speak out against abuses. It will also examine the challenge posed by the Chinese authorities and other governments in Asia to the fundamental concept that human rights are universal, not culturally specific.

Other speakers at the include Dr Walden Bello from Focus on the Global South; Xiao Qiang, Executive Director of Human Rights in China; Han Dong Fan, Chief Editor of the China Labour Bulletin; and Dr Zosimo Lee from the University of the Philippines.

In a graphic illustration of the power and influence of China throughout Asia, the Philippines government denied a visa to Gedun Rinchen, a Tibetan exile who was tortured while jailed for his peaceful activities, on the grounds that his participation would be 'too sensitive'.

Opening the conference, Mr Daniels stressed the importance of NGOs in promoting human rights within the region and internationally. "Governments have sought to hijack the human rights debate in the interests of their own legitimacy and power. It is up to non-governmental organizations to speak up for ordinary people throughout the region."

China is one of the world's most powerful nations with a fifth of the world's population and a rapidly expanding economy. The attraction of this market which is causing the international community to turn a blind eye to repression of its 1.2 billion people.

The Chinese authorities do not tolerate any form of dissent. They allow torture to continue, use the death penalty to try to cure social problems, brutally crackdown on ethnic groups calling peacefully for more independence, and detain hundreds of thousands of people every year without charging them with any crime.

When China's rulers refuse to respect fundamental human rights, they set a precedent for repressive governments worldwide. When they argue that local conditions and economic necessity mean human rights must take second place, their words are echoed by governments throughout the Asia/Pacific region.

"Many Asian governments tend to use the controversial notion of 'Asian values' to legitimize human rights violations, claiming that these are 'internal affairs'," Somchai Homlaor said. "The promotion of so-called 'Asian values' by these governments poses a major challenge to the protection of human rights as it denies the fundamental principles of human rights: universality and indivisibility."

Asian non-governmental organizations have played a key role in upholding the universality of human rights at various United Nations meetings such as the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Asian NGOs also challenged their governments' espousal of cultural specificity when they passed the 1993 Bangkok declaration, which affirmed the universality of human rights. The Asian Charter of Human rights -- prepared by more than 500 Asian NGOs -- states that "any claim for cultural exception to exclude human rights is false and a pretext to justify repression - human rights are universal, encompassing all cultures and traditions."

Strategies for protecting human rights defenders in China and across Asia as a whole are a key theme of the conference. Those who have bravely spoken out in China, like Wei Jingsheng, are now in jail. As the forum opens they have recently been joined elsewhere in Asia by a colleague of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Win Htein, who was sentenced this month to seven years for making a video on the failure of the rice crop. In Indonesia, labour leader Muchtar Pakpahan and pro-democracy activist Bambang Sujatmiko are currently detained -- charged with subversion -- which carries a maximum sentence of death.

The conference will also send a message to the business community -- that respecting human rights is good for business. Arbitrary decision making and the lack of consistency in the application of the law pose a threat to the development of a safe and sound business environment. The business community therefore has a vested interest in pressing for a legal environment that will conform to international standards, not just in matters of trade but also in matters of human rights protection.

ENDS.../

For further details, press packs or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Mark Ogle, Royal Palm Hotel: Tel.: (632) 522 1515 (room 613)

Fax: 522 0768; mobile tel.: (63) (0) 912 312 4005

Jessica U Soto, AI Pilipinas

Tel.: (632) 926 6280; fax.: 411 5450;

info-pager: 127799907