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China: Controls tighten as Internet activism grows

Since November 2002 there has been a dramatic rise in the number of people detained or sentenced for expressing their opinions online or for downloading information from the Internet in China. According to Amnesty International's records, by January 2004, 54 people had been detained or imprisoned for such activities - a 60 per cent increase on the November 2002 figures. In addition, an unknown number of people remain in detention for disseminating information about the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) over the Internet.

"We consider them all to be prisoners of conscience and reiterate our calls to the Chinese authorities to release them immediately and unconditionally," Amnesty International said today, publishing its latest report on the control of the Internet in China.

Those detained include students, political dissidents, Falun Gong practitioners, workers, writers, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, former police officers, engineers, and businessmen. They have been accused of various "offences", including signing online petitions, calling for reform and an end to corruption, planning to set up a pro-democracy party, publishing 'rumours about SARS', communicating with groups abroad, opposing the persecution of the Falun Gong and calling for a review of the 1989 crackdown on the pro-democracy protests. Most have been charged with "subversion" or "endangering state security" - criminal charges which have resulted in prison sentences of between 2-12 years.

China is said to have in place the most extensive censorship of the Internet of any country in the world. Over the past year, there has been a growing trend towards assigning greater responsibilities of surveillance and monitoring to a variety of companies in China such as Internet Cafes, Information Service Providers (ISPs) and other enterprises.

Nevertheless, Internet activism appears to be growing in China as fast as the controls are tightened. Over the last year, there have been signs of Internet users acting increasingly in solidarity with one another, in particular by expressing support for each other online. Such expressions of solidarity have proved dangerous as a growing number of people have been detained on the basis of such postings.

"We consider those who use the Internet to campaign for human rights reforms or to raise concerns about the detention of other peaceful activists to be human rights defenders," Amnesty International emphasized. "The Chinese authorities should be supporting and encouraging their activities rather than putting them behind bars."

One of those detained, but who was recently released, was Liu Di, a psychology student from Beijing who used the online pseudonym, "stainless steel mouse". She was held for over a year without access to her family after she posted messages in an Internet chatroom which were critical of the government and which called for the release of another Internet activist, Huang Qi. She was released in November 2003 following widespread public concern about her detention and it was later announced that she would not face formal charges. Almost 3,000 Internet users, based mainly in China, had signed petitions calling for her release. At least five were later arrested; four of them, Cai Lujun, Luo Changfu, Du Daobin and Kong Youping, reportedly remain in detention.

"We welcome Liu Di's release, but she should never have been detained in the first place," Amnesty International stressed. "And to arrest others who have expressed concern about her plight compounds the abuse."

In its report, the organization also refers to several companies, including Cisco Systems, Microsoft, Nortel Networks, Websense and Sun Microsystems, which have reportedly provided technology which has been used to censor and control the use of the Internet in China. Amnesty International fears that by selling such technology the companies did not give adequate consideration to the human rights implications of their investments.

"We urge all companies which have provided such technology to use their contacts and influence with the Chinese authorities to bring an end to restriction on freedom of expression and information on the Internet in China and to urge the release of all those detained for Internet-related offences in violation of their fundamental human rights."

Background

Internet access has expanded considerably in China over the past year. According to official statistics, the number of Internet users had risen to 79.5 million by December 2003 from 59.1 million users in December 2002 - an increase of 34.5 per cent. This has presented the authorities with greater challenges in their attempts to censor and control the online activities of Internet users.

Amnesty International's report contains five appeals on behalf of eight individuals, including Huang Qi, a computer engineer from Sichuan, who set up his own website. He was detained on 3 June 2000 after several Chinese dissidents abroad posted articles on his website on the eve of the 11th anniversary of the crackdown against the 1989 pro-democracy protests. Three years after his arrest he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment after an unfair trial. He has reportedly been badly beaten by prison guards and is now in poor health suffering from regular headaches. His family were only permitted to visit him once - in October 2003.

For the full text of the report, please go to:

"People's Republic of China: Controls tighten as Internet activism grows"

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170012004>

For the full text of other Amnesty International reports on Internet and freedom of speech in China from November 2002, please go to:

"People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China"

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170072002>

"People's Republic of China: State Control of the Internet in China: Appeal Cases"

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170462002>

For the text of the report on freedom of expression and use of Internet in Viet Nam, please go to:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa410372003>

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