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China: Protester against forced abortion sent to prison camp

Fifteen years ago, Mao Hengfeng was coerced into undergoing an abortion in the seventh month of her pregnancy. Since that date she has protested tirelessly about what happened to her. Information leaked out early this week from China that she has now been sent to a labour camp by the police having never had a lawyer or appeared in a court. Reports also indicate that she has been tortured and severely beaten.

According to information from the New York based NGO, Human Rights in China, Mao Hengfeng, was dismissed from her job at a soap factory in 1988 in Shanghai when she became pregnant for the second time. For an urban woman to have more than one child is against the country's family planning laws. Mao refused to have an abortion, and she was detained in a psychiatric hospital and injected with medication. Despite this, she managed to continue her pregnancy and gave birth to her second daughter.

Mao appealed under the China's labour law against her dismissal from her job. During this time she became pregnant a third time. When she was seven months pregnant she was told that she would get her job back if she had an abortion, and against her will the pregnancy was terminated. However the court ruled against her anyway, saying the factory had a right to dismiss her since she had violated the Chinese family planning policy.

Mao has protested against the ruling, the coerced abortion and the treatment she suffered at the hands of the police ever since. Both she and her daughters, who are under 18 years of age, have been detained several times. Mao has also been forcibly confined in psychiatric units and undergone shock therapy.

Amnesty International has just learnt that Mao Hengfeng, in April this year, was sent to a labour camp to undergo 18 months of "re-education through labour", without charge or trial. Amnesty International fears that the torture and ill-treatment may continue.

Due to tight government control of information in China, it is extremely difficult for human rights organizations to undertake independent research on the topic of forced or coerced abortions and sterilizations. However torture and ill-treatment have been reported as a result of China's family planning policies. Local birth quotas play a prominent part in the policy, upheld by stiff penalties and rewards. Women who become pregnant without permission may be punished with heavy fines and dismissed from their jobs. The pressure is often very high and if the woman doesn't obey, officials may resort to violence.

Another horrific case of forced abortion was reported in August this year. 29-year-old Ma Weihua faced drug charges and was forced to have an abortion in police custody so that the judge could sentence her to death "legally". A pregnant woman cannot be sentenced to death in China. No more information has come out about Ma's fate since her trial on 23 August. Amnesty International and other NGO's are closely monitoring her case and are concerned for her life.