

UA 101/01 Death penalty

20 April 2001

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (PRC)

Jin Ruchao
Wang Yushun
Hao Fengqin
Hu Xiaohong

The four men named above were sentenced to death on 18 April. Jin Ruchao was convicted of causing explosions that killed 108 people, and the others of illegally producing and selling him the dynamite used. Amnesty International is concerned that they may have been convicted without full investigation of the crime or fair trial because the authorities were under pressure to solve this high-profile crime quickly.

On 16 March, in the northern city of Shijiazhuang, four bombs went off before dawn, demolishing a cotton mill dormitory building and severely damaging three other blocks of flats, reportedly killing 108 people. A nationwide search for Jin Ruchao, who previously lived in one of the buildings, began within hours of the explosions. It is not clear why the police immediately considered him a suspect. Jin Ruchao, who is partially deaf and communicates with a pen and paper was arrested on 31 March.

The men were tried by Shijiazhuang City Intermediate People's Court. In court it was alleged that Jin Ruchao had blown up the buildings out of "hatred" for a neighbour, and members of his family. His father and stepmother lived in one of the buildings, and his ex-wife and her parents in two others. He was also convicted of the murder on 9 March of a woman he had been living with in Yunnan province (over 2000 km away). The official Chinese news agency, Xinhua, reported that "Jin had nursed grievances against his neighbours as well as his stepmother, his former wife and his sister over trifling domestic matters...so he resolved to use bombs to let off steam".

There is continuing scepticism that one person could have arranged all the bombings, and there are continuing reports that the explosions may have been the work of feuding criminal gangs, or workers angry at being laid off from the cotton mills. Xinhua has denied these reports, saying that Jin had confessed to the crimes and acted alone, putting the bombs in place the night before the blast, and returning in the morning to set them off, hailing taxis to move quickly between the sites.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The death penalty is used extensively, arbitrarily, and frequently as a result of political interference. There are often mass executions during major events or on public holidays, such as 1 January and the Chinese New Year. Execution is by shooting or lethal injection.

A national "Strike Hard" campaign to crack down on crime was announced in Beijing on 11 April, aimed at "cracking down on evil forces and wiping out hooligans" and focussing on violent crimes as well as crimes involving multiple theft or robbery. On that day alone, 89 people were executed. Since then there have been reports that at least another 79 people have been sentenced to death.

It has also been reported that "Special Procedures" have been introduced to deal quickly and effectively with criminals, which could result in arrests based on minimal evidence and summary trials and executions.

Amnesty International is concerned that this renewed crackdown may influence the proceedings and outcome of criminal trials during the campaign. Previous anti-crime crackdowns have resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of people sentenced to death and a large number of suspected miscarriages of justice.

Only a fraction of death sentences and executions carried out in the country are publicly reported. From 1990 to the end of 1999, Amnesty International recorded at least 27,599 death sentences and 18,194 executions. Even based on this limited record China executes many more people than the rest of the world put together.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/faxes/express/airmail letters in English, Chinese or your own language:

- urging the authorities to commute the death sentences of Jin Ruchao, Wang Yushun, Hao Fengqin and Hu Xiaohong;
- expressing grave concern that a national "Strike Hard" campaign has been announced, which has already resulted in the execution of 89 people in one day;
- expressing concern that this campaign will result in summary trials and a potential rise in the number of miscarriages of justice in China;
- urging the authorities to reduce their use of the death penalty, in accordance with international trends and United Nations resolutions;
- expressing opposition to the death penalty in all cases as the ultimate form of cruel and inhuman punishment, and as a violation of the right to life, as guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

APPEALS TO:

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PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat,
or your section office, if sending appeals after 1 June 2001.