

China: Extensive use of torture - from police to tax collectors to birth control officials

When officials from a township birth control office got a hold of Zhou Jiangxiong in May 1998, they hung him upside down, repeatedly whipped and beat him with wooden clubs, burned him with cigarette butts, branded him with soldering irons, and ripped his genitals off.

The 30-year-old farmer from Hunan province was tortured to death because the officials were trying to make him reveal the whereabouts of his wife, suspected of being pregnant without permission.

This is not an isolated incident, each year many people are tortured to death in China. Torture is widespread and systemic, committed in the full range of state institutions, from police stations to "re-education through labour" camps, as well as in people's homes, workplaces and in public, Amnesty International revealed today in a new report on torture in China. Victims of torture can be anyone from criminal suspects, political dissidents, workers and innocent bystanders to officials.

"Although the government has said it is committed to fighting torture, investigations rarely bring perpetrators to justice and investigators readily accept official denials," the organization said.

This commitment is undermined by government directives during periodic "strike hard" anti-crime campaigns and political crackdowns, such as those against the Falun Gong and alleged "separatists" in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) when officials are given the green light to use every means to achieve quick results.

A growing range of officials are being cited as perpetrators of torture; tax and fine collectors, judges, prosecutors, court clerks, village and party leaders and many types of security officials.

In 2000, Shenzhen media exposed a series of cases where security officials working in local businesses had beaten, tortured and even killed customers who complained about prices or were suspected of theft.

Many women have been tortured, including being raped and sexually abused, by police who accuse them of prostitution. Police have the power to issue an instant fine on suspected prostitutes and send them and their alleged clients for up to two years' detention for "custody and education". Police choose to detain and torture women in order to extract lists of alleged clients to blackmail. Many alleged prostitutes and clients have died under torture.

Alleged "vagrants" are also at risk of torture. A woman who arrived on business in Guangzhou in July 1999, had her luggage stolen and was arrested by police who believed she was a mentally-ill vagrant. She was gang raped in a hospital for sick, disabled or mentally-ill vagrants and her family had to pay "treatment fees" to have her released. Although she later identified 8-9 suspects and filed several complaints and appeals for compensation, investigations stalled until the case was reported in the media.

The torture of political dissidents remains commonplace. In the XUAR and Tibet, few political prisoners escape torture. In July 1999, ethnic Uighur Zulikar Memet denied allegations of separatist activities saying that he had been tortured to confess. He showed the court signs of torture, including missing fingernails which had been pulled out. There was no investigation. Zulikar Memet was reportedly executed on 14 June 2000.

Bogus psychiatric hospitalization is also being used to suppress dissent. Xue Jifeng, a labour activist from Henan Province, was forcibly confined in Xinxiang City Psychiatric Hospital from December 1999 - June 2000 and force fed drugs. He was released only after agreeing not to participate in politics and to stop "caring about other people's affairs."

The Chinese media has played an increasingly important role in exposing cases and contributing to a growing debate on abuse of power by police, loopholes in legal protection and the horrors of certain types of detention. However they never report allegations of torture in 'political' cases.

"Torture in China remains a major human rights concern. The range of officials resorting to it is expanding, as is the circle of victims. The government has acknowledged for many years that torture is a serious problem but has done little about it. They must now take effective action," Amnesty International said.

The report makes several recommendations to the government including; upholding zero tolerance of torture, exclude from the courts all evidence extracted under torture, ending incommunicado and arbitrary detention, ensuring detainees access to lawyers, family and medical treatment and instituting an effective complaints mechanism.

For more information on Amnesty International's Campaign Against Torture, visit www.stoptorture.org

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