

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE: 0001 HRS GMT 03 MARCH 1998

China: 1997 – No cause for complacency

1997 was yet again a year in which many people in China suffered gross human rights violations, despite some high profile human rights initiatives by the government, according to a report issued by Amnesty International today.

The past year saw the arbitrary detention of possibly thousands of protesters and suspected government opponents, the continued imprisonment of thousands of political prisoners, grossly unfair trials, widespread torture and ill-treatment in police cells, prisons and labour camps, and the extensive use of the death penalty.

“The Chinese authorities often argue that certain changes in the field of human rights are not possible in China at present, notably due to the need to “maintain stability”. However, a growing number of people in China are now pointing out that allowing people to air their views and grievances without persecution is essential to stability and development,” Amnesty International said.

“Rather than accepting the government’s arguments, foreign governments should be supporting the calls from within China for change to promote genuine human rights improvements.”

In March 1997, the National People’s Congress amended the Criminal Law, repealing the crimes on “counter-revolution”, but simply replaced them with national security offences which can be used to imprison people for exercising freedom of opinion or speech. At least 2,000 prisoners convicted of counter-revolutionary crimes are still imprisoned.

The Chinese authorities have responded to international criticism by allowing a visit in October by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, signing the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and formally inviting the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit China at a future date.

“While these steps are welcome, little has changed in practice,” Amnesty International said. “There is no reason for complacency on the part of the international community, and no excuse for relaxing pressure on the Chinese authorities.”

Despite some legal changes, Chinese legislation still allowed more than 200,000 people to be detained in 1997 without charge or trial for “re-education through labour”. Many provisions in laws newly introduced or revised during the 1990s are specifically designed to curtail fundamental freedoms and imprison people who attempt to use these freedoms.

Although there seemed to be a growing tolerance of dissent in the past few months – at least to the extent that some dissidents were able to make public appeals without being immediately arrested – it remains selective and unpredictable, and does not apply to some regions, issues or categories of people.

As China's National People's Congress is due to start its annual session this week, Amnesty International is calling on it to ratify the ICESCR and make it effective in China, and to sign the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

REPRESSION IN 1997:

In **Xinjiang**, the crackdown on suspected Muslim nationalists, religious “extremists” and alleged terrorists intensified. Following rioting in Yining, hundreds, possibly thousands of people were rounded up and at least 15 people sentenced to death at mass rallies – twelve of whom were executed immediately afterwards. In **Tibet**, at least 96 people were detained for “crimes” such as peacefully protesting a ban on all images of the Dalai Lama. In June 1997, monks were locked inside a monastery for three weeks until they signed declarations denouncing him.

State control over **religious activities** also affects Christian groups. On 16 June, Xu Guoxing, a 41 year-old Protestant preacher from Shanghai, was detained while preaching to a small group of people at a private residence. He was subsequently assigned to three years of “re-education through labour”, without charge or trial, for “disturbing public order”, and his family only informed when they telephoned the police after he had gone missing.

Protests by **workers** and **dissidents** led to arrests throughout the year. Some were detained for short periods in apparent attempts by police to intimidate or silence them. Four poets in Guiyang were detained on 26 January 1998 as they planned to launch an independent literary magazine. According to reports, the six-year-old son of one of the poets was taken into police custody together with his father, and their family was still without news of them a week later.

Thousands of **political prisoners** detained without trial or convicted after unfair trials remain imprisoned. They include many prisoners of conscience serving prison sentences for their part in the 1989 pro-democracy movement. Political trials continued to fall far short of international standards, with verdicts and sentences decided by the authorities before the trial, and appeal hearings usually a mere formality.

Torture and **ill-treatment** of detainees and prisoners, including political prisoners, remained widespread, sometimes resulting in death. According to official sources, between January and July 1997, 300-400 cases of torture and ill-treatment were investigated, but many cases are not investigated and these figures do not reflect the real incidence of torture.

The **death penalty** was used extensively to tackle growing crime resulting from economic and social changes. The revision of the Criminal Law confirmed the growing use of the death penalty in China, particularly for non-violent offences including fraud, forgery, or selling fake and shoddy goods. Although there was one positive development with the abolition of the death penalty for people under 18, China continued to execute more people than the rest of the world put together.

.../ENDS

For a copy of the report or to arrange an interview, please call:

AI Asia Pacific Regional Office (Hong Kong): (+852) 2385 7187
AI International Secretariat (London): (+44) 413 5566/5729