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Premier Li Peng
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Dear Premier

In recent years a series of highly disturbing reports and allegations have emerged of abuses against children in individual state-run orphanages scattered across China. Amnesty International is gravely concerned by the growing body of credible evidence, including eye-witness accounts, film footage, Chinese press coverage, orphanage workers' testimony, and now officially published statistics and records of internal investigations. The Chinese Government should answer fully these allegations of children being deliberately left to die, sexual and physical abuse of children, denial of medical care, and serious neglect of children. Over the past year, for example allegations have been made about orphanages in Nanning, Zhaoqing, Harbin, and in particular Shanghai.

In the case of the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute, most recently documented by a Human Rights Watch report, employees of the orphanage and concerned citizens from different sectors of society, including trade unions and the municipal people's congress, consistently raised allegations of grave abuse over several years. Official investigations were carried out and concluded that the allegations were groundless and made maliciously by a few individuals. However, no convincing evidence appears to have been provided to prove that the specific allegations made were unfounded and congress members reportedly voiced their complete dissatisfaction with the process. The outcome of the investigations was reportedly influenced by senior municipal authorities who also ordered a ban on negative reporting of the issue. Furthermore, the individuals who raised the allegations are said to have been victimized.

Representatives of the Chinese Government abroad, as in previous cases, have categorically denied the allegations. As the body of evidence becomes increasingly compelling, blanket denials or a failure to provide evidence to disprove specific detailed allegations do little to counter the concerns raised by these disturbing reports. Such denials can only lead to the inference that the abuses in question may be officially condoned. From the most recent evidence, it appears clear that government officials at the highest level were aware of the problem and are therefore fully responsible for any failure to act or to ensure that such abuses do not continue.

Furthermore, access to orphanages appears to have been curtailed following previous reports of abuses. This has only served to reinforce suspicion that there may indeed be something to hide. We note that foreign journalists were invited to the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute this week and were able to interview the former director, but that many allegations remain unanswered. These journalists were not permitted to visit the Shanghai No 2 Social Welfare Institute where, according to the report, the problems were transferred following a cleanup of the Children's Welfare Institute in mid-1993. Pre-arranged visits and limited access are no safeguard against abuses and do little to restore confidence.

In view of the factors above and the gravity of the allegations, we believe it is incumbent on the Chinese Government to demonstrate that such abuses do not result from official policy. The authorities must demonstrate that existing legislative protection of the rights of children in state care is effective in practice. Amnesty International calls on the Chinese Government to initiate new, thorough and impartial investigations into each allegation in an open and systematic way and to punish perpetrators in cases of proven abuse. Credibility demands that the evidence obtained and findings revealed be published in full. We also call on the government to allow unrestricted access to such institutions by independent observers. As a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Chinese Government has the obligation to take all appropriate measures to effectively protect the rights of children.

I look forward to receiving your response on this matter. I am copying this letter to the Minister of Civil Affairs for his information.

Yours sincerely

Anne Burley
for the Secretary General