

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index ASA 17/019/2001 - News Service Nr. 93

Embargoed for : 01/06/2001

China: Tiananmen Square -- still on the agenda

Twelve years after the brutal killing of hundreds of unarmed citizens in Beijing following the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the Chinese government continues to ignore pleas for justice from relatives of the victims and the international community, Amnesty International said today in a new report ahead of the anniversary of the massacre on 4 June.

"The crackdown in Tiananmen Square may have happened 12 years ago but for many the pain is not confined to memory, it is a part of their everyday lives. The Chinese government owes justice to the thousands of victims and their relatives."

Military and plainclothes police keep watch each year on the Qing Ming Festival (Grave Sweeping Day), when people hold memorial services for the victims buried at Wanan Cemetery. The father of one victim said "...this kind of psychological trauma doubles the effects of wounds caused by our losses. We have lost hope of finding peace in our old age."

Ding Zilin leads a group of mothers, "The Tiananmen Mothers", in the quest for justice. She has been repeatedly harassed, detained and put under surveillance. Her son had just turned 17 years old when he was shot through the heart from behind on the evening of 3 June 1989.

An online petition, www.fillthesquare.org, launched by the Tiananmen Mothers a year ago, has been signed by more than 20,000 people from 60 different countries.

This year, groups working against disappearances in other Asian countries, including a group of parents of disappeared persons in India, have sent letters of support to the Tiananmen Mothers ahead of the 12th anniversary.

A US civil lawsuit against the then prime minister, Li Peng, was filed in New York by victims and relatives in September last year, seeking reparation for damages and loss of life. The Chinese government has reacted calling the lawsuit a "political farce". A new hearing will establish whether the case may be heard.

"While the Chinese government still refers to the crackdown as a 'political incident' and a 'counter-revolutionary riot' that had to be crushed, the relatives of those killed continue their campaign for justice. The relatives are pressured to remain silent and face harassment and intimidation if they speak out."

Amnesty International is calling on the Chinese authorities to initiate a public and impartial inquiry to account for all people killed and injured, to grant compensation to the victims and families and ensure that those responsible are brought to justice. They should also release all those still imprisoned for taking part in the protests or for commemorating the victims of the massacre since then.

Amnesty International has a record of more than 200 people who are still imprisoned or on medical parole for their activities during the 1989 protests. Every year dissidents continue to be imprisoned or sent to labour camps for peacefully commemorating the anniversary of the killings.

For a copy of the report "Tiananmen -12 Years on. The Tiananmen Mothers-Campaigning for accountability", email mcatsani@amnesty.org

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