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EU-China Summit: Dialogue must have substance to be meaningful

Dialogue on human rights issues is to be welcomed -- but it can only be worthwhile if it has substance, Amnesty International said today, reacting to Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's call for dialogue instead of confrontation on human rights issues at the China-EU summit in Beijing today.

"A dialogue is only a means to an end, and not an end in itself. Any meaningful dialogue must squarely address the sharp deterioration in the human rights situation in China since the end of last year," the human rights organization said.

"Unfortunately, the dialogue so far has not led to concrete improvements in the human rights situation in China but rather, the contrary.

"What we are witnessing is one of the most relentless crackdowns since 1989 against people peacefully exercising fundamental freedoms of expression and association," Amnesty International pointed out.

The human rights organization highlighted, in particular, the use of draconian national security laws against political dissidents, suspected nationalists and, most recently, members of the Falun Gong movement.

Large numbers of people have been executed after summary trials, harsh prison sentences have been meted out to curb dissent and there are persistent reports of torture and the death in custody of prisoners, it pointed out.

"These practices strike at the heart of EU and other human rights dialogues and cast doubts on China's sincerity in signing key human rights conventions," Amnesty International said.

"EU leaders must not allow the dialogue process to be subverted by rhetoric and by token concessions, but press for real guarantees from Beijing on human rights issues. And China, if it is serious about dialogue, must act now to improve the situation on the ground."

"We welcome the EU leaders' appeal to Beijing to abolish capital punishment since China continues to use the death penalty to execute more people than the rest of the world put together. We also welcome the EU's call for ratification, by Beijing, of two key UN covenants on human rights," Amnesty International said.

"We hope these appeals will be followed through, and not fall victim to trade and economic considerations. But this is clearly not enough. Pressure must also be put on China to stop the numerous and serious human rights abuses which are now taking place across the country. "

The human rights organization called, in particular, for pressure on Beijing to stop the current wave of arbitrary arrests and unfair trials against followers of the Falun Gong, political dissidents and others and to end summary executions of political prisoners in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.

There must also be pressure, it said, for China to review the system of 're-education through labour' in which people can be arbitrarily detained for up to three years without charge or trial in labour camps.

Finally, Amnesty International also called for a review of all cases of the large numbers of people still imprisoned in China for taking part in the 1989 pro-democracy protests.

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