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CHINA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PROTESTS GOVERNMENT'S ENTRY REFUSAL

Amnesty International today wrote to the Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng protesting the official refusal to allow the organization's delegates to attend an international conference in China -- including physically ejecting one of the delegates from the airport in Beijing.

"It is outrageous that a government that claims to have opened its doors to the world is now slamming that door in the face of an international human rights organization attending an international conference," Amnesty International said.

Two of the organization's delegates were refused visas to the Seventh International Anti-Corruption Conference. A third delegate -- Director of Amnesty International's Legal and Intergovernmental Organizations Program Nicholas Howen -- was granted a visa but was later called to the Chinese embassy in London to be told that the visa had been cancelled. This action was taken even though the organization had been officially invited to the conference by the Deputy Procurator General, and had fulfilled all the visa requirements.

"The about face on Mr Howen's visa in particular made it clear to us that the government's visa refusal was a political move following our outspoken campaigning on human rights violations in China during the recent UN Conference on Women in Beijing," the organization said.

"They are seeking to punish Amnesty International and silence any debate about human rights in China -- and we are particularly worried about what message this sends to people who speak out in China itself."

"We wanted to get this issue out into the open, and make the government account for its actions publicly -- which is why we sent Mr Howen to Beijing on the strength of the visa that had already been stamped in his passport."

Mr Howen arrived in Beijing from London at approximately 9:30 local time, where he was not allowed through passport control. For two hours, he was forced to wait while immigration officials consulted on his status.

During this time, he made repeated requests to be given reasons for his refused entry. The airport immigration officials -- led by the section leader of the immigration inspection unit -- said they could not give him a reason. When he asked to speak to senior officials including those in the Foreign Ministry he was told that no one was available to speak to him. He produced his letter of invitation and other official documents, but received no substantive response.

While he was making these requests, one of the immigration officials said "we can do whatever we want".

Mr Howen, an Australian national, also asked repeatedly to telephone the Australian embassy. His request was refused, and he was told that the officials had been instructed by the "general office" not to let him phone the embassy. When he twice tried to use a nearby telephone, the receiver was taken from his hands.

As the return flight for London was getting ready to leave, the immigration officials became increasingly insistent that he board the flight, and Mr Howen continued his demands to make a phone call. At this stage, another official grabbed his wrists tightly and half-dragged him up the stairs, down the corridor and to the airplane door escorted by six other uniformed officers. During this episode, the official said angrily: You are in China now, not Australia.

Mr Howen arrived in London at 4pm local time.

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