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PHILIPPINES: INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN CHINA

MANILA ~ An international conference on human rights in China ended here today with a challenge to the 'Asian values' espoused by regional governments and a pledge to protect human rights advocates in China.

Delegates from 35 international and regional non-governmental organizations attended the conference, which was jointly organized by Amnesty International and the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA). Countries represented included Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Thailand.

"Human rights in China are a measure of human rights internationally," the end of conference declaration stated. "At stake is the principle that fundamental human rights are universal standards which governments must uphold, irrespective of local conditions, political objectives, economic strategy or national security."

Asserting the universality of human rights is a formidable challenge for the human rights movement in Asia. Like some other governments and power elites in Asia, China's rulers argue that human rights are a western concept which is inappropriate and inapplicable to their domestic situation. They have sought to promote an alternative 'Asian view' of human rights in the interests of their own legitimacy and power. Other governments outside the region have accepted and promoted these arguments in the pursuit of their economic and other interests.

"As representatives of national, regional and international non-governmental organizations in the Asia-Pacific region we assert our conviction that human rights are shared by all people, irrespective of culture, religion or gender," the declaration said. "We believe that political, economic and social rights are interdependent and indivisible. Respect for the dignity of the person is fundamental to the health of civil society and economic progress in any country."

Participants at the forum focussed on the Chinese government's increasing repression of human rights advocates in China and called on human rights activists in Asia and worldwide to help build a broad movement to protect them. Within China there is a growing number of human rights defenders who take great risks to defend fundamental human rights. They are intellectuals, journalists, students, peasants and women working for their rights. Wei Jingsheng, Gao Yu and Chen Ziming are just some of those to be imprisoned for their peaceful activities.

Delegates called on governments worldwide to ensure that human rights are high on the agenda of bilateral and multilateral dealings with China.

"The international community must hold China to account for its appalling human rights record. It must insist that China not only abides by international laws and standards in areas such as trade and security, but also in the treatment of its own people," the statement said.

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