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HONG KONG: CHINESE FOREIGN MINISTER'S STATEMENTS ON POST-1997 VIGILS
DESIGNED TO PROVOKE AND TEST

A top-level warning by China against pro-democracy activities in Hong Kong is highly provocative, and seems designed to test international concern for human rights in Hong Kong after its return to China, Amnesty International said today.

Chinese Foreign Minister and Vice-Premier, Qian Qichen, appeared to rule out future political demonstrations in Hong Kong, and to signal restrictions on press freedom after China resumes sovereignty on 1 July 1997. The statements came two days after China vowed to stop the "illegal" exit of Chinese dissidents through the territory.

"By giving their clearest warning to date that they will not tolerate commemorations in Hong Kong of the Beijing massacre, the Chinese authorities appear to be playing a game of intimidation," Amnesty International said.

"The comments seem designed to test the resolve of Hong Kong's people to protect their rights, and the interest of the international community in helping them do so. The ability to hold peaceful demonstrations and vigils will be an important touchstone for confidence in arrangements for the transition and the 'high degree of autonomy' promised in Hong Kong's Basic Law."

In the 16 October *Asian Wall Street Journal*, Qian stated that after 1 July 1997 '*Hong Kong should not hold those political activities which directly interfere in the affairs of the mainland of China*'. He added that the Hong Kong media will have to avoid propagating '*rumours or lies*' and '*[putting] forward personal attacks on Chinese leaders*'. Foreign Ministry spokesperson Shen Guofang, at a briefing on 17 October, reiterated the warning, stating that: '*Hong Kong people should not interfere in mainland China's affairs by organizing some political activities to attack the mainland's internal affairs*'.

Qian Qichen, who chairs the Preparatory Committee for the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), could not have been unaware of the reaction his words would evoke in Hong Kong.

"These comments appear to reflect a decision in Beijing to raise the political stakes in relation to human rights issues, and tighten the limits of Hong Kong's autonomy in this area," Amnesty International said.

The effect of Qian's comments will be to cause more people in Hong Kong to declare themselves either in favour or against the positions taken by Beijing. Public views expressed by Hong Kong personalities in relation to Qian Qichen's statements will no doubt influence their future ability to hold political office.

It is also a test of international concern for human rights in Hong Kong. On 23 October, the UN Human Rights Committee will hear a report presented by the United Kingdom Government on behalf of the Hong Kong Government, describing any measures taken in Hong Kong to improve human rights safeguards, which Amnesty International has long found insufficient. China has so far given no indication that it would accept future reporting to the UN Human Rights Committee.

To date, it appears that very few governments have expressed directly to the Chinese Foreign Ministry their concern to see all human rights protected and promoted in the future HKSAR. While some governments have discreetly given asylum to Chinese dissidents over the years, they have apparently been unwilling to make any formal expressions of concern in relation to Hong Kong.

“The handover of Hong Kong presents China with an important opportunity to demonstrate to the world that it is serious about improving human rights protection for all its citizens,” Amnesty International said. “The international community has a stake in seeing that the transition of Hong Kong to SAR status under the Chinese Constitution is smooth and leads to improvements in human rights safeguards and government accountability.”

In this context, Amnesty International is concerned that statements such as Qian's may have a long-term, harmful effect on human rights safeguards in the HKSAR, and as a result, human rights activists and others in Hong Kong are potentially at risk.

The organization is therefore calling on the Government of the People's Republic of China to clearly reiterate that it will respect the high degree of autonomy it is committed to grant the HKSAR, that its policies and practices in relation to Hong Kong will fully respect the need to protect and promote all human rights, and to affirm that it will fulfill all Hong Kong's international obligations in relation to human rights.

Amnesty International is also calling on concerned Hong Kong personalities, in particular on all candidates for the position of HKSAR Chief Executive, on all Hong Kong members of the Preparatory Committee and on all members of the Selection Committee, to make clear publicly their commitment to promoting and protecting all human rights, including the right to peaceful assembly and to freedom of expression.

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