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China: Justice denied for those disabled in 1989 Tiananmen crackdown

Seventeen years on, the legacy of the 1989 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement lives on for the victims and their families. It is not an issue of the past, but a tragedy which continues to impact on their lives today.

Most attention on the victims and survivors has focused on those imprisoned or killed. On the 17th anniversary of the crackdown, Amnesty International is highlighting the plight of those who were disabled as a result of the events of 4 June 1989.

Their disabilities impact on a whole range of their human rights, including the right to work, the right to livelihood and the right to health. However, the failure of the authorities to change their official stance towards the incident and deliver justice for the victims has left them with no channels for obtaining compensation or redress.

Amnesty International reiterates its call on the Chinese authorities to conduct a full, independent and impartial investigation into the events of 4 June 1989 with a view to bringing the perpetrators to justice and providing compensation to the victims or their families.

In an interview with Amnesty International, Chinese activist Qi Zhiyong explained how he was shot in the lower part of his leg on the night of 4 June 1989. He said he was taken to hospital after three hours, but by that time the wound had become infected and the doctor had to amputate his leg to save his life.

At that time, Qi Zhiyong was working for a construction company which provided basic health care for its employees in line with China's 'cradle-to-grave' social welfare policies – a system which has since been dismantled as a result of economic reform.

"My work unit was really nice to me," Qi said. "They offered me a one-off sum of compensation of 100,000 Yuan, but only if I would agree to say that my disability was the result of a work accident." He refused the payment on principle.

Since then, Qi Zhiyong has refused to stay silent about 1989. He has done several media interviews to draw attention to those who were killed in the crackdown and their families. He finds it easier to talk about them than to talk about himself. "You know there are many people in China, my small life is not so important," he says.

Qi Zhiyong faces an uphill struggle in his fight for justice. He remains under tight police surveillance and has been detained several times for his campaigning activities, particularly around the anniversary of 4 June.

He was arbitrarily detained by the police for over seven weeks earlier this year after he participated in a public hunger-strike protest in support of other Chinese activists. [See Amnesty International press release: ASA 17/017/2006].

Qi had to give up his job with the construction company as a result of his disability. He found it hard to find new employment, and opened a small snack and cigarette shop to eke out a living. However, he says he was forced to move his shop several times due to large-scale construction related to the Beijing Olympics. Following his participation in the hunger-strike protest this year, the authorities revoked his trading licence and Qi's wife was also dismissed from her job apparently as a result of his campaigning activities. With an eight-year old daughter to support and faced with high medical bills to treat the lingering effects of his injury, Qi Zhiyong and his wife find it hard to make ends meet.

A few years ago he applied for an unemployment allowance from the Beijing Department of Civil Affairs, but he says they turned him down. "An official laughed at me and accused me of betraying my country by criticizing the Chinese government in the western media. They said that surely I must already have received money from the west."

However, Qi Zhiyong does not regret participating in the 1989 protests or dwell on his disability. In fact he says he feel 'reborn' after the crackdown: "I am 50 years old this year, but I feel like 17, since my 'real' birthday was on 4 June 1989!" he laughs.

Others have been left with severe mental disabilities as a result of torture or ill-treatment in prison following the crackdown. Yu Dongyue was freed from prison in February 2006 after serving 16 years in prison for throwing paint at the portrait of Mao Zedong in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. He was left with serious mental impairment after being subjected to torture and ill-treatment in prison, including being tied to a pole and left in the sun for several days, periodic beatings and at least two years' solitary confinement.

At the time of his release, Yu Dongyue showed signs of having suffered a complete mental collapse - he was unable to recognize life-long friends or family members and kept repeating words over and over. A psychiatrist recommended medical treatment. However, the authorities have given him no financial assistance following his release and his family cannot afford to pay.

The legacy of 1989 lives on for these and other victims of the crackdown and their families. The authorities, however, continue to reject calls for an independent investigation into the crackdown with a view to bringing the perpetrators to justice and providing compensation for the victims.

A recent case, however, may show a glimmer of hope. Last month it was reported that local authorities had paid 70,000 Yuan (approx. US\$8,700) to the mother of Zhou Guocong, a 15-year-old boy who was beaten to death by police in Chengdu, Sichuan province on 7 June 1989. He had been detained for joining pro-democracy protests. Significantly, however, the payment was described as 'hardship assistance' rather than 'compensation'. Chinese activists have suggested that other families may also have been privately 'compensated', but asked to keep it quiet.

This information was publicized by Huang Qi, an activist who set up a website to circulate information about people who remain missing after the 1989 crackdown [<http://www.64tianwang.com>]. According to reports, Huang Qi described this payment as a 'major breakthrough' but added that 'to demand a vindication [of the June 4 incident] is too high a democratic goal in this society'.

Huang Qi is a former prisoner of conscience, sentenced to five years in prison in connection with materials deemed politically sensitive by the authorities which were previously published on his website. [See ASA 17/001/2004 and ASA 17/045/2004]

Over the years since 1989, several other activists and journalists have been imprisoned in connection with their reporting about the crackdown. For example, journalist Shi Tao continues to serve a ten-year prison

sentence after being convicted for 'leaking state secrets' in April 2005. He had posted to an overseas website Communist Party instructions on how journalists should handle the 15th anniversary of the incident. [See <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/chn-310106-action-eng>].

Amnesty International considers to him to be a prisoner of conscience and has called for his immediate and unconditional release. The organization also continues to support calls from Chinese human rights activists for justice for the victims of the 1989 crackdown by bringing the perpetrators to justice and providing full, official compensation for the victims or their families.