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China: More activists stand up for human rights, despite risks

As Chinese and EU leaders meet in the Hague this week, Amnesty International is releasing a report examining the growing numbers of human rights activists in China, and the great risks they face in speaking out.

"We are seeing more and more individuals and groups working to protect human rights," said Catherine Baber, deputy Asia Director at Amnesty International. "Yet they continue to operate in a climate of mistrust and hostility. They may be at risk of arrest or imprisonment at any time."

Within the last eighteen months, at least five activists have been imprisoned for vaguely defined 'state secrets' offences, after they collected information on human rights issues and sent it abroad. They include:

Abdulghani Memetemin, a 40-year-old journalist and teacher, who reported on human rights violations against the ethnic Uighur community in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, in north-west China

Liu Fenggang, 45, who wrote a number of reports about the destruction of Protestant churches and the harsh treatment suffered by members of underground congregations

Zheng Enchong, a 54-year-old lawyer, who represented families who had been forcibly evicted from their homes in Shanghai. He was accused of faxing documents to a human rights NGO in New York.

"These three men represent a growing number of individuals in China who stand up in the face of repressive laws to defend people's basic human rights," said Ms Baber. "We call on the Chinese government to release Zheng, Liu, and Abdulghani Memetemin, and all other activists who have been imprisoned for their peaceful human rights activities."

Chinese law contains sweeping definitions of crimes, such as 'subversion' and 'stealing state secrets', which can be used to detain and imprison people simply for engaging in legitimate human rights activities. Activists have also frequently been subject to arbitrary detention, harassment, and intimidation.

In March this year China amended its Constitution to include the clause, "*the state respects and protects human rights*". The most powerful demonstration of this commitment would be an end to imprisonment, arbitrary detention and intimidation of activists on the ground.

The Constitution also guarantees citizens' rights to petition the authorities, but a state institution,

the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, recently warned that an increasing number of people thought official state channels were no longer sufficient to sort out their complaints about local corruption and malpractice. It recognized that some local governments resorted to violence to stop petitioners making their case to central government, a practice it described as 'appalling and outrageous'.

Activists work across a range of fields, from Christians defending their right to worship to the 'Tiananmen Mothers' group campaigning for justice for their children who died in the 1989 crackdown. Economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights -- all have become subjects for activism in China.

"The Chinese authorities have got to realize that these individuals are working to protect the human rights of their fellow citizens," said Ms Baber. "They must ensure that all human rights activists are able to work without fear of harassment, arbitrary detention or any other abuses of their human rights."

Amnesty International is also calling on the international community, including the EU, to urge China to release all those imprisoned for their peaceful human rights activities and reform the laws used to imprison them.

The report also contains appeals on behalf of the following individuals:

Li Dan, 26, an activist working to defend the right to health of those suffering with HIV/AIDS in China
Yao Fuxin, 54, and Xiao Yunliang, 58, both workers imprisoned for peacefully defending workers' rights
Zhang Shengqi, 30, and Xu Yonghai, 44, both members of the unofficial Protestant church working to protect the right to freedom of religion for fellow Christians in China
The Tiananmen Mothers, a group of relatives who campaign for justice for those who were killed in the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

To see the report, please go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170452004>

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