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"CHINA: NO ONE IS SAFE"
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AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Today marks the launch of Amnesty International's worldwide campaign against the systematic violation of human rights in China.

In China the human rights record is appalling.

Torture is rife -- and merciless.

Executions are used to cure a host of social ills -- and the number of crimes punishable by death keeps rising.

Hundreds of thousands of people are detained every year without ever being charged with a crime.

And when brought to court they find that the catch phrase "verdict first, trial second" rings all too true.

Workers who try to organize independent labour groups have been imprisoned and unofficial religious groups who dare to worship have paid for their actions with prison sentences.

The thread running through all these violations is the arbitrary way in which Chinese officials use -- and abuse -- the laws of the land.

People who go along with the system are left alone. But those who challenge the status quo often find the laws used against them.

Like those peasants who landed in prison for protesting against extortionate rates of taxation.

Violations like these have increased in recent years and have crushed the expectations of people that greater economic openness would lead to more political freedom.

But economic reforms have not been matched by essential human rights reforms in China.

The harsh reality is that repression has increased in recent years and the government continues to brutally clamp down on anything it perceives as a threat to the established order.

And what has the international response to this repression been?

Inconsistent and opportunistic.

Sporadic government protests -- such as in the case of Wei Jingsheng -- but no serious or substantial challenge to a system that generates gross human rights abuses.

Foreign delegations make part in staged visits to model prisons or spruced up orphanages in reaction to international public exposure, but seldom pursue the issues once they have left the country.

At best, this is human rights diplomatic theatre.

At worst, it sends a worrying signal about the government's commitment to human rights when the international community effectively ignores the human rights of a fifth of the world's population.

This is why Amnesty is campaigning on China.

China today exerts an enormous magnetic force on Asia and the world, both economically and strategically, and it has emerged as an influential global player.

But with global power comes global responsibility. And now, more than ever, is the time to ensure that China abides by the rules of the international community, and is held accountable to both the people of China, and the rest of the world.

As a founder member of the United Nations, and a permanent member of the Security Council, China has been part of the body setting the international standards which the government now claims infringe on its national sovereignty.

And foreign government have been all too ready to let China bow out of its international obligations for the sake of economic advantage.

But China and these governments know that a poor human rights record has the potential to damage broader economic ambition.

Indeed, this has led to some responsiveness to international concern and a growing internal debate.

In 1991 China published its first ever position paper on human rights.

It has admitted human rights delegations from other countries.

It has ratified some international human rights standards.

It responded quickly and vehemently to recent exposure of the treatment of children in state run orphanages.

And right now, the National People's Congress is debating changes to the legal system.

But for every sign of sensitivity to human rights criticism, there are others of open contempt for international opinion.

The sentencing of Wei Jingsheng is a case in point.

This is why Amnesty is determined to build up the pressure to bring about significant human rights changes.

We have two targets.

The first is governments, including the Chinese government.

The second is business leaders worldwide.

The message to the Chinese and foreign governments is that human rights is a central issue which cannot be sidestepped in the development of economic relations.

The message to the business community is that by turning a blind eye to human rights violations they neglect their moral responsibilities which may well endanger their financial investments. If it is true that money talks, the business can have a powerful voice.

These messages will be coming from our partners in the NGO community, particularly here in Asia.

And they will be coming from Amnesty's more than one million members from all regions of the world. They will be exposing human rights violations, demonstrating publicly, lobbying governments and pushing for a resolution condemning human rights violations in China at the United Nations.