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President Obama must use his first official visit to China to urge the authorities to reverse the sharp rise in human rights violations in the country, Amnesty International has said.

The organisation reminded President Obama in an open letter that he has a responsibility to publicly push for an improvement in China's poor human rights record during his scheduled visit to China next week.

Thousands of Chinese activists and human rights lawyers continue to face arbitrary detention, harassment and imprisonment following unfair trials while the authorities continue to execute more people than the rest of the world combined.

"The Chinese government has stepped up efforts to silence any internal criticism or challenge, despite the country's massive economic growth. President Obama must take this opportunity to show that the US views human rights as a central plank of its relationship with China," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific Director.

Amnesty International continues to monitor the cases of many individuals who are being held in administrative detention, including the "re-education through labour" detention system, where detainees can be locked up for up to four years without trial.

Torture by law enforcement personnel is endemic, resulting in many prisoners' deaths while in custody.

Human rights lawyers are harassed, intimidated, assaulted, abducted, forcibly disappeared, placed under surveillance and house arrest and faced criminal charges for protecting the rights of others.

In the first half of 2009 alone, Amnesty International documented the cases of at least four human rights lawyers who were threatened with violence; at least 10 who were prevented from meeting with or representing their clients in courts, and at least five who were briefly detained, one for one month, because of their human rights work.

The announcement this week that authorities had executed eight Uighurs and one Han Chinese for their alleged role in the July riots are further proof of the urgent need for the US administration to push China for an independent, impartial, and transparent investigation of the events surrounding the July riots.

Uighurs and other ethnic minority and religious groups such as Tibetans and Falun Gong practitioners continue to be ill treated and face persecution for their beliefs.

“Despite China adopting a human rights action plan after hosting the Olympic Games last year its government needs to show the world that it is serious about meeting its obligations under international human rights law,” said Sam Zarifi.

Amnesty International calls on China to show its commitment to human rights by immediately meeting the following benchmarks:

- Abolition of the “Re-Education through Labour” detention system. There is a strong domestic call in China for the reform of the system. In the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, an open letter calling for its abolition solicited 15,000 signatures.
- A public and independent investigation of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown against pro-democracy demonstrators. Human rights defenders and activists face police harassment and surveillance when they press the authorities to take responsibility for the crackdown in 1989.
- A lifting of all restrictions and obstacles to freedom of worship. Thousands are detained for their religious activities.
- Cessation of the repression of Tibetans and Uighurs and respect for their ethnic, cultural and religious identity. Tibetans and Uighurs has been the target of systematic and extensive human rights violations. These include arbitrary detention, torture, severe restrictions on freedom of religion and employment discrimination.

It also calls on President Obama to urge China to:

- Release Shi Tao, a journalist who was sentenced to ten years imprisonment on charges of “illegally providing state secrets to foreign entities” due to an email he sent to a US-based website. Court records show that one of the evidence was Shi Tao’s account holder information provided to the police by Internet company Yahoo! Inc.
- Release immediately and unconditionally those detained solely for engaging in peaceful protest, including support for the Dalai Lama, the independence of Tibet, or greater autonomy for Tibet.
- Release prisoner of conscience Ablikim Abdiriyim, son of Uighur activist Reibya Kadeer. He is serving a nine-year sentence in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) on charges of “instigating and engaging in secessionist activities.” There are serious concerns that he may have confessed under torture. Ablikim Abdiriyim was detained with his siblings and several family members in May 2006. Their detention prevented them from meeting with a United States Congressional delegation on a scheduled visit. His brother Alim Abdiriyim is also in prison on charges of tax evasion, which may be politically motivated.
- Ensure lawyers’ rights to carry out their legal work without harassment, intimidation, violence or fear of criminal prosecution.