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China's clamp down on "heretical organizations"

China's two year "anti-superstition" campaign is now a massive crackdown on followers of religious and spiritual movements such as the Falun Gong, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

Amnesty International is calling on the Chinese government to stop the arbitrary detentions, unfair trials and other human rights violations resulting from the official campaign against "heretical organizations".

"The crackdown is politically motivated, and the vast majority of its victims are ordinary people who merely exercised peacefully their fundamental rights to freedom of belief, association and expression", Amnesty International said.

"The trials of alleged leaders have been grossly unfair," Amnesty International said. "The law was used retroactively to secure convictions and defence lawyers were prevented from pleading not guilty. It is clear that the outcome was a foregone conclusion."

Tens of thousands of people have been arbitrarily detained, some of them repeatedly for short periods of time, hundreds have been sent without trial to forced labour camps or sentenced to prison terms after unfair trials, and many followers have been tortured. Some have been detained in psychiatric hospitals and forced to take drugs and at least ten people have died in police custody in suspicious circumstances.

The family of 60-year-old Chen Zixiu, a Falun Gong follower, were asked to collect her body from a police station in Shandong province where she had been detained for four days in February. Her body was covered with bruises, the teeth were broken and there was blood coming out of her ears. She was arrested on suspicion of planning to go to Beijing to petition the authorities against the banning of the Falun Gong.

Many people have reported being tortured or ill-treated in detention. Cheng Fengrong, a 42-year-old woman, was detained by Shunyi police and reportedly slapped while being handcuffed to a tree, beaten with a broom which broke in two and then forced to stand barefoot in the snow; she was also punched and kicked and had two basins of cold water poured onto the back of her neck which froze under her feet.

The Falun Gong movement was banned in July last year after the Chinese government reportedly became concerned with its ability to mobilize large numbers (10,000 followers stood quietly in front of the leadership compound in Beijing on 25 April 1999). Accusations against Falun Gong supporters range from "organizing illegal gatherings" to "leaking state secrets".

Before the ban on Falun Gong, the authorities arrested more than 21,000 people during the "anti-superstition" campaign. The crackdown is now being extended to other Qi Gong groups which like the Falun Gong, promote breathing and meditation exercises. Qi Gong is practiced by millions of people in China in many variants. Six hundred followers of Zhong Gong, one of the largest variants, have been detained since October and 25 core leaders have been

formally arrested. Ironically, one of the group's eight principles includes "loving the country and obeying the law".

The Amnesty report examines legal documents issued by the legislature and the judiciary to legitimize the government crackdown, as well as new regulations which further restrict fundamental freedoms.

Two Beijing bookstore owners, sisters Li Xiaobing and Li Xiaomei, were detained for three months without charge before being sentenced in a secret trial on 28 January to seven and six years' imprisonment for selling Falun Gong publications. The sisters were arrested two days before the Falun Gong was banned but like many other followers, legislation was used retroactively to charge and convict them.

Others have been sentenced, without trial, to terms of "re-education through labour" to be carried out in forced labour camps. Some 150 female followers are reportedly serving sentences of between one and three years in a labour camp for women in Changchun city. A group of them went on hunger strike in December to protest the long days and hard labour.

Hong Jirong (f), a 62-year-old professor at Sichuan University, was reported to have been sentenced to three years of "re-education through labour" for involvement in writing a letter of appeal to United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan.

Background

The Falun Gong was founded in 1992 and is described by its adherents as a spiritual practice of body, spirit and mind, based on various schools of Buddhism and traditional forms of self-cultivation which centre around a practice of meditation and Qi Gong exercises. These exercise sessions are often held by groups in public places. Before it was banned, the Falun Gong had training stations, practice sites and 'contact persons' across China, with practitioners coming from all sectors of Chinese society and almost all provinces.

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