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CHINA: WOMEN IMPRISONED AND ABUSED FOR DISSENT

As China prepares to host the upcoming United Nations World Conference on Women, Chinese women continue to suffer human rights violations for carrying out work which women's organizations across the world can freely do.

According to a report published by Amnesty International today, many women in China are being detained, restricted or harassed for exercising fundamental rights such as freedom of expression or association.

"Chinese women have been locked up for years for joining the pro-democracy movement; harassed and persecuted for promoting human rights; sent to do forced labour in punishment for political crimes; hideously tortured and sexually abused in custody," Amnesty International said.

In addition, the Chinese government's policy of compulsory birth control -- whereby couples must have official permission to bear children -- results in serious human rights violations affecting women in particular. Amnesty International has received reports that forced abortion and sterilization have been carried out by or at the instigation of people acting in an official capacity.

Women have been detained in storerooms or offices -- sometimes for days or even weeks -- until they are "persuaded" to have an abortion. One official reported being able to transfer such women to the local detention centre for up to two months if they remained intransigent. Pregnant women have been rounded up in the middle of the night by local militia and family planning officials to be taken in trucks to have abortions or be sterilized at local hospitals.

Amnesty International takes no position on the official birth control policy in China, but it is extremely concerned about the human rights violations resulting from it. Abortions and sterilizations performed in these circumstances amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. The organization calls on the Chinese Government to issue an unequivocal prohibition of the use of coercive measures which result in such violations, and take effective measures to ensure that officials who perpetrate, encourage or condone such human rights violations are brought to justice.

Large numbers of women have also been detained without trial or sentenced to terms of "re-education through labour" for sexual relations outside marriage. Chinese women may also face fines, detention and forced labour as arbitrary punishment for other "sex crimes" which include adultery, bigamy, "hooliganism" -- including having sexual relations with foreigners "where the effect in society is bad or the consequences serious" -- and "destroying" a soldier's marriage. One official survey estimated that 90 per cent of crimes committed by juvenile females are "sex crimes".

The Amnesty International report cites numerous cases of women prisoners of conscience in China:

- ◆ Phuntsog Nyidron, a Tibetan nun serving a 17 year prison sentence, is one of nearly 200 Tibetan women known to have been arrested since 1992, and believed to be still detained for their involvement in independence demonstrations.
- ◆ Gao Yu, a journalist, is charged under legislation concerning state secrets which Amnesty International believes "encompasses matters that would be the subject of public debate and scrutiny in many other countries and goes far beyond what is needed to protect national security" She is serving a six-year prison sentence for disclosing "important state secrets" after a secret trial at which she had no legal representation.
- ◆ Tong Yi, assistant to Wei Jingsheng -- one of China's best known dissidents-- is serving two and a half years of "re-education through labour" without being charged or tried.

Wives and female relatives of imprisoned dissidents are frequently the victims in "a pattern of continuing harassment, intimidation and attempted isolation of those who speak out and steadfastly pursue legal remedies on behalf of detained relatives or friends. Wang Hui, Li Guoping, Gou Qinghui and Zhang Fengying -- wives of imprisoned human rights and labour activists -- are all under constant police surveillance and have been detained for interrogation during their struggle for justice for their partners.

While the Chinese Government acknowledges that police use torture, few of the victims officially recognized have been women. Besides, according to Amnesty International, acknowledging the problem is simply not enough. Neither are the provisions in Chinese legislation aimed at protecting women against sexual abuse in detention, which are often ineffective in practice.

Information received by Amnesty International indicates that rape may be a serious problem in some local detention centres and the so-called "shelter and investigation" centres. Women in detention have also been beaten with electric batons and subjected to electric shocks on the breasts, thighs and sexual organs. In some cases, dogs have reportedly been unleashed on naked women. Women have also been severely beaten by prison guards and inmates assigned supervisory duties, for failing to complete forced labour quotas.

Since 1991, six female Tibetan political prisoners have died in custody or shortly after being released from jail. All were reportedly healthy on arrest and tortured or ill-treated during their time in prison.

"The Chinese Government must ensure those and other cases of torture and death in custody are thoroughly and impartially investigated. The authorities in the country must clarify the causes of death, and explain what -- if any -- medical treatment was given to those women," Amnesty International said.

Amnesty International urges the Chinese Government to take all the necessary steps to improve the human rights situation of women in China. "During the 1995 World Conference on Women, women all over the world will be turning their eyes towards Beijing. The Chinese Government cannot simply gloss over the human rights abuses suffered by women in China."

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