

19 December 2000

AI Index ASA 17/048/2000 - News Service Nr. 239

China: Falun Gong deaths in custody continue to rise as crackdown worsens

"While China claims it is committed to promoting and protecting human rights, the crackdown on the Falun Gong and other 'heretical' groups is being stepped up and the number of victims is growing daily," Amnesty International said today.

At least 77 Falun Gong followers are reported to have died in custody, or shortly after release, in suspicious circumstances since the crackdown began in July 1999. It appears that many of them died as a result of torture or after force-feeding while they were on a hunger strike.

Of the reported deaths, 17 took place in Shandong province and 14 in Heilongjiang province. In many cases, despite testimonies from various sources which indicate that the victims were tortured, local officials have denied any wrongdoings and the government has failed to investigate the cases or take any steps to prevent further abuses.

"These deaths in custody are an appalling illustration of the authorities' callous disregard for the lives of people detained solely for their peaceful activities. The government must take seriously its commitment to prevent torture and take action immediately." (China ratified the UN Convention against Torture in 1988).

Apart from the high number of deaths in custody, numerous other cases of torture or ill-treatment by police, arbitrary detentions and unfair trials are regularly reported. Reports indicate that in some areas all identified Falun Gong practitioners are being systematically detained

in special "reform centres". Those who don't renounce their beliefs are kept in jail.

The recent jailing of two foreign-based Falun Gong practitioners shows the Chinese authorities are not afraid of negative publicity abroad and are now more brazen in their crackdown.

In November, Zhang Kunlun, a 59 year-old practitioner with dual Chinese and Canadian citizenship, was sentenced without trial to three years' detention in a forced labour camp. This was the first time a foreign-based Falun Gong practitioner was sentenced rather than deported.

In December, US-based member Teng Chunyan (f) was sentenced to three years' imprisonment on a charge of "providing secret information to foreigners and people across the border". Teng Chunyan collected evidence of the detention of Falun Gong members in a Beijing mental hospital and passed it on to foreign media in Beijing and contacts in the USA. Her trial was reportedly held behind closed doors.

"The international community cannot watch silently while these gross human rights violations are taking place. It must condemn these abuses and put pressure on China to take action to stop them," the organization said.

Background

Since September 1999, at least 77 Falun Gong practitioners (42 women) are reported to have died in official custody, or shortly after release on medical parole, in circumstances that remain unclear and following reports of torture and ill-treatment. Seventeen people died in Shandong province alone, and 14 in Heilongjiang province.

Of these 77, 12 (four women) according to official reports “jumped” to their deaths whilst being transported or interrogated by police; and eight (four women) “fell” whilst in detention, the majority in provincial representative offices in Beijing.

Eighteen (13 women) of those who died had reportedly engaged in hunger strikes during their detention, with seven (five women) allegedly dying after attempts to force-feed them. Several reports indicate that force feeding was carried out by people with no medical training or experience, resulting in damage to the windpipe and other reportedly fatal complications. In addition to the 77, six practitioners (four women) are confirmed to have committed suicide whilst at liberty, although several were reportedly still under police surveillance.

Official sources have confirmed most of these deaths, rejecting outright all allegations of torture and ill-treatment.

Zhang Kunlun, a Chinese-born Canadian citizen who was sentenced in November 2000 to three years in a labour camp, had moved to Canada in 1989, acquired Canadian citizenship in 1995, but returned to China in 1996 to take care of an ailing relative and took up a job at Shandong Art University. Since July, Zhang had been detained twice for his Falun Gong beliefs. On 15 November, he was re-arrested by police at his home in Jinan city, Shandong province. The police officers reportedly had a document stating he had been sentenced to three years in a labour camp, which gave no specific reason for the sentence. He was subsequently sent to serve the sentence at the Liu Chan Shan labour camp in the suburbs of Jinan.

Teng Chunyan(f), who was sentenced to three years' imprisonment by a court in Beijing in December 2000, is a permanent resident in the USA. Her husband is an American citizen. A 37 year-old acupunctarist in

New York and member of Falun Gong since last year, she returned to China in early 2000 to try to gather information on the government's crackdown on the group and had contacts with foreign journalists in Beijing. She was detained in May 2000 and brought to a court hearing on 23 November. Despite protests at her detention by the US government, the sentence against her was announced in December.

\ENDS

public document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>