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China: Stop crackdown on foreign reporters

China's recent crackdown on foreign journalists covering potential protests inspired by events in the Middle East and North Africa signals the government's fear of popular protests, Amnesty International said today.

"The authorities must honour the commitments they made before the Beijing Olympics in 2008 to allow the foreign press to conduct interviews in China without official interference," said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific director.

"These new restrictions on foreign journalists are part of the overall crackdown on freedom of expression and opinion that has also seen arrests and detentions of Chinese activists and lawyers."

The Foreign Correspondents Club of China said more than a dozen reporters, including from the BBC, CNN, and Bloomberg, were beaten or detained by security officers as they went to cover possible protests in the city's Wanfujing shopping district on Saturday.

Plain clothes officers beat and kicked a video journalist, who required hospital treatment.

Police stripped journalists of their equipment and forced them to leave the area, identified as the site of a potential protest by anonymous online activists. Few, if any, protesters actually appeared at the site, in light of heavy government security presence.

"Attempts to control the foreign media through violence, intimidation, and harassment show the authorities' contempt for basic press freedoms and for China's own rules," said Sam Zarifi.

In the past few weeks, anonymous users on social networking sites have called for a "Jasmine Revolution" in China and urged potential protesters to gather peacefully in cities around the country.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the journalists were responsible for the attacks they suffered.

Several foreign media outlets reported that police in Beijing and Shanghai told them they were forbidden to report in public areas identified as potential protest sites by online activists.

According to the 2008 regulations governing foreign media - which formalized the temporary freedoms granted to foreign reporters during the Beijing Olympics - foreign correspondents are allowed to interview any consenting individual without official permission.

The regulations do not apply in Tibet, where Chinese authorities continue to ban independent reporting.

Despite the regulations, foreign reporters who travel outside China's urban centres are still harassed by local officials who claim they have no knowledge of the national rules.

"The Chinese government should be expanding press freedoms, to allow Chinese as well as foreign reporters to do their jobs without official harassment," said Sam Zarifi.