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Tiananmen Square Anniversary

Tiananmen Square: Justice denied for disabled survivors

Seventeen years on, the legacy of the 1989 crackdown on the pro-democracy movement lives on for the victims and their families. It is not an issue of the past, but a tragedy which continues to impact on their lives today. Read our interviews with two survivors whose lives, and those of their families, have changed forever.

Most attention on the victims and survivors has focused on those imprisoned or killed. On the 17th anniversary of the crackdown, Amnesty International is highlighting the plight of those who were disabled as a result of the events of 4 June 1989.

Their disabilities impact on a whole range of their human rights, including the right to work, the right to livelihood and the right to health. However, the failure of the authorities to change their official stance towards the incident and deliver justice for the victims has left them with no channels for obtaining compensation or redress.

A recent case, however, may show a glimmer of hope. Last month it was reported that local authorities had paid 70,000 Yuan (approx. US\$8,700) to the mother of Zhou Guocong a 15-year-old boy who was beaten to death by police in Chengdu, Sichuan province on 7 June 1989. He had been detained for joining pro-democracy protests. Significantly, however, the payment was described as 'hardship assistance' rather than 'compensation'. Chinese activists have suggested that other families may also have been privately 'compensated', but asked to keep it quiet.

Qi Zhiyong, a painter for a construction company, was shot in the leg on the evening of 4 June 1989. His leg was subsequently amputated. Read our interview with Qi.

Yu Dongyue was imprisoned for 20 years for throwing red paint over a poster of Mao Zhedong in Tiananmen Square. Find out more about Yu.

Qi Zhiyong

"I am 17 years old, my 'real' Birthday is on June 4th 1989!" laughs 50 year-old Qi Zhiyong. Having lost a leg and his livelihood following the armed crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square, amazingly he still manages to feel as if he was "reborn" by the events of that day.

Qi Zhiyong was shot in the lower part of his leg on the night of 4 June 1989. He was only taken to hospital three hours later, by which time the wound had become infected and the doctor had to amputate his leg to save his life.

At the time Qi was a painter with a construction company. "My company was kind to me," Qi said. "They offered me a one-off sum of compensation of 100,000 Yuan, but only if I would agree to say that my disability was the result of a work accident." He refused the payment – he did not want to hide the fact that he was wounded by the government in the pro-democracy crack-down.

He has also refused to stay silent in public; every year he does interviews with national and international media. With characteristic humility, his message is never about his own circumstances: "You know...there are many people in China who suffered more than me, I am nothing important." He calls for financial and humanitarian help for the Tiananmen Mothers whose sons, daughters or husbands died in the events of 1989.

A tough life

His life has not been easy since he was injured. In the first few years following his amputation, Qi Zhiyong applied for a disability fund from various government departments, but was refused. In the mid 1990s he sold cigarettes and chewing gum on the street, eventually managing to save enough money to open a small shop.

He applied for a basic allowance a few years ago (an unemployed person can receive \$470 Yuan for monthly livelihood assistance). The officials laughed at him and said, "You always talk to the Western media about how bad the Chinese government is. Haven't you got some money from them through the betrayal of your country?"

He has been forced to move his shop many times due to rebuilding in Beijing, including in preparation for the 2008 Summer Olympics. Each time the construction work began without warning or compensation. "They just dig here and there, digging in front of my shop's door then I have to move" Qi said.

Often, around important days such as June 4th or a big national meeting, Qi Zhiyong has been forced into hiding, or has been put under house arrest. During the National People's Congress meeting in 2006 he was detained for 51 days after he participated in a hunger-strike for social justice.

Following his participation in the hunger-strike, the authorities revoked his trading licence and he was forced to close his shop. Qi's wife was also dismissed from her job, apparently as a result of his campaigning activities.

With Hepatitis C, high blood pressure and diabetes, each month Qi Zhiyong has medical costs of around 1000 Yuan (\$120USD), and he has an eight year old daughter to support. The family was barely managing on the small incomes from the shop and his wife's work. Now things are even harder.

The Past and the Future

For many people June 4th 1989 is in the past. Even those who were directly affected, injured or left disabled by the events of Tiananmen Square refuse to talk about it. They question his stubborn memory, "It's now so long ago, what's the point in talking about it? Why can't you just forget it and get on with your life?"

Qi Zhiyong has also started to campaign for disability rights in China. Many public facilities are not accessible for those in wheelchairs, and there are no discounts on public transport. Disability allowance, for those lucky to get it, is only 200-300 Yuan per month; medical costs and assistance are not included.

He sees China's economic development as wealth gathered in the hands of a few, with serious corruption going unchallenged. He thinks that China is not ready to host the Olympic games, but that the government is sacrificing its peoples' interests to "show the Chinese miracle" for the sake of national pride.

When asked how he sees his future life, Qi Zhiyong doesn't reply but instead calls again for compensation for the mothers whose sons have died. He says he does not regret his injuries. He's proud that he was a part of the pro-democracy movement. He says he only started to learn about democracy following his injury and now he is convinced more than ever, that only democracy can save China.

Yu Dongyue

Yu Dongyue was gifted. An exceptional student in high school, he was accepted by Hunan Normal University when he was only 15 years old. A talented artist and poet who spoke fluent English - and he was enthusiastic about his country.

In 1989, during the pro-democracy demonstrations, he threw red paint on a portrait of Mao Zedong in Beijing. For this offence he was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment.

Even when imprisoned, Yu Dongyue was reportedly irrepressible. He organized other inmates to gather the necessary materials to make a radio to listen to foreign broadcasts. He would not accept injustice, and would quietly give visitors to the prison letters to forward to the government appealing against inmates imprisonment. And he constantly discussed democracy and his dreams of a new China with other prisoners.

As a result of this, Yu Dongyue was severely tortured and ill-treated during his imprisonment: he was tied to a pole and left in the sun for days; suffered periodic beatings; and at least two years in solitary confinement... until he reached the point of mental collapse.

After 1991, his family found that he began to talk to himself when they visited him; he also suffered from memory loss and could not recognize close family members. His family asked for him to be released on bail for health reasons, but the prison authorities claimed that he was only pretending to be mentally ill and refused the request. With international pressure he was finally released on 22 February 2006, after serving nearly 17 years in prison.

The impact of torture and ill-treatment on Yu Dongyue's mental health has been catastrophic for both him and his family. He reportedly cannot construct logical sentences, or follow a conversation. He has a phobia of the national flag; on seeing a policeman he compulsively hands over his cigarettes; and he often stands facing the wall, sometimes for hours, without moving. He can manage to go to the toilet by himself, but needs help removing his clothing. The family's only consolation is that he smiled when he came home.

Doctors in Hunan Xiangtan University Second Hospital did tests on Yu Dongyue after he was released, and judged his mental health as being severely affected.

"His reactions were slow; he could not talk in a logical sequence; could not keep to a topic of dialogue; could not answer the majority of questions; responded with un-related answers or remained silent; and could not complete any of the given tasks."

An MRI test detected a shadow on part of his brain. Doctors suggested he needed intensive medical treatment and should stay in hospital. However, government officials still deny that Yu Dongyue has a mental illness, and he and his family receive no financial assistance, nor compensation. The family could not afford the medical fees for Yu to remain in hospital for treatment.

Yu's situation affects the whole family, which is experiencing much financial difficulty. Yu's brother supports Yu, three elderly members of the family and his own two daughters. Yu's sister has health problems of her own and is already in debt after paying for two operations. Unless the family's situation changes dramatically, it is unlikely that they will be able to obtain enough money for further medical treatment for Yu.

Amnesty International continues to support calls from Chinese human rights activists for justice for the victims of the 1989 crackdown by bringing the perpetrators to justice and providing full, official compensation for the victims or their families.
