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CHINA: POLITICAL TRIALS RESULT IN HEAVY SENTENCES ON DISSENTERS

In a letter to Prime Minister Li Peng, Amnesty International today protested at the trials and harsh sentences passed recently against human rights activists and suspected opponents in China.

“These trials confirm the government’s determination to crush any form of dissent,” the organization said. “They also show the authorities’ readiness to misuse the law for their own political purposes and to pass heavy sentences on innocent victims as a warning to others.”

In the letter, Amnesty International reiterates its concern that state security and state secrets legislation has been used to convict individuals who have merely peacefully exercised their fundamental freedoms, on the grounds that their activities “threatened” national security.

The harshest sentence was passed against Ngawang Choephel, a 30 year-old musicologist detained in Tibet since August 1995. After a trial reportedly held behind closed doors at Shigatse Intermediate People’s Court, he was handed down an 18-year jail term for “espionage activities” -- the third longest single sentence known to have been passed in Tibet for political activities.

An official radio report on 26 December claimed that Ngawang Choephel had been sent to Tibet by the “Dalai [Lama] clique with expenditures and equipment provided by a certain foreign country”. However, the report gave no information to substantiate this accusation or to show that he was involved in activities threatening national security. To Amnesty International’s knowledge, there is no evidence that Ngawang Choephel was travelling in Tibet for any other reason than his stated purpose of filming and recording traditional Tibetan performing arts.

In another case, Li Hai, a 42 year-old human rights activist in Beijing, was sentenced on 18 December 1996 to nine years’ imprisonment for “prying into and gathering” alleged “state secrets”.

The charge was based on accusations that Li Hai had attempted to gather information about political prisoners jailed during the crackdown on the 1989 pro-democracy movement, including their names, addresses, sentences, the charges against them and their place of detention. According to his family, the verdict stated that such information constituted a “state secret”. He was convicted by the Chaoyang District Court in Beijing after a secret trial from which his family was excluded.

“Ngawang Choephel and Li Hai are prisoners of conscience who should be immediately and unconditionally released,” Amnesty International said. The nature of their cases and harshness of the sentences run counter to Chinese government claims of improvements in human rights.”

Harsh sentences were imposed recently in Inner Mongolia on two ethnic Mongol intellectuals accused of alleged “separatist activities”. Hada and Tegexi [Eds. one name] were sentenced on 6 December 1996 to 15 and 10 years’ imprisonment respectively on charges of “separatism”, for their peaceful political activities to promote human rights and a Mongolian cultural revival in Inner Mongolia. Amnesty International considers both to be prisoners of conscience.

Two labour activists are also awaiting sentence in Guangdong province. The trial of Li Wenming and Guo Baosheng started in Shenzhen in November 1996. They were recently reportedly found guilty of “plotting to overthrow the government”, but their sentence has not yet been announced. They potentially face a sentence of 10 years or more because their peaceful support of workers’ rights has been deemed “counter-revolutionary”. Amnesty International is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

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