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China: Wei Jingsheng is released, but not free to stay in China

Amnesty International today welcomed yesterday's release of Wei Jingsheng, China's best known dissident, but regrets that his release was not unconditional.

Wei Jingsheng was released from prison on medical parole yesterday and sent to Detroit, in the USA, for medical treatment. The 47 year-old dissident had spent most of the past 18 years in jail, save for a brief period of freedom in 1993.

"This is great news for Wei Jingsheng, however, the terms of his release may mean he will be in exile for a long time, as he may be sent back to prison to serve the rest of his sentence if he returns to China," Amnesty International said today.

Wei Jingsheng was serving a 14-year prison sentence for "subversion" due to expire in 2009. Under Chinese law, prisoners released on medical parole may be returned to jail at any time to serve the rest of their sentence after receiving medical treatment outside of prison.

"We hope the Chinese authorities will allow him to return to China a free man if he so wishes," Amnesty International said. "Wei Jingsheng should not have been imprisoned in the first place. He was jailed solely for expressing his views and having contacts with dissidents and other people during the few months he was out of prison in 1993."

"We also hope his release will pave the way for other releases of prisoners of conscience", Amnesty International said, pointing out that more than 2,000 people convicted of "counter-revolutionary" offences remain in prison in China, according to official sources, and the number of people detained for the peaceful exercise of their fundamental human rights, some without charge or trial, is much higher.

Background

Wei Jingsheng was first detained in 1979 and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment on "counter-revolutionary" charges for his peaceful activities during the "Democracy Wall" movement of the late 1970s. He was released on parole in September 1993, after serving all but six months of his sentence, but was rearrested in April 1994. After being held for nearly 20 months without charge or trial, he was sentenced to 14 years' imprisonment in December 1995 after being convicted of "engaging in activities in an attempt to overthrow the government".

His health, already affected by many years of imprisonment in harsh conditions, further deteriorated after his re-arrest. Over the past year, his family reported that he was suffering from high blood pressure, possible damage to his cervical vertebrae, infection in his gums and other complaints. At the Tangshan labour camp, he was held with common criminal prisoners and reportedly beaten by them on several occasions. In June 1997, according to his family, he was severely beaten by a fellow prisoner while a prison guard looked on without intervening. /ENDS