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China: release “Re-education through Labour” prisoner of conscience

Mao Hengfeng, a long-time petitioner for her own and others’ human rights, has been imprisoned without access to a lawyer or court hearing, and is also reported to have been tortured . Help us to secure her release and urge the Chinese authorities to abolish “Re-education through Labour”.

“Re-education through Labour” (RTL) has been used in China since the mid-1950s as an extra-judicial form of detention. People receiving RTL terms have no access to a lawyer, there is no court hearing, and “sentencing” is usually decided by the police alone. Under the current system, people can be detained in a RTL facility for up to four years.

Those serving terms of RTL are at high risk of being beaten or subjected to other forms of torture or ill-treatment, particularly if they refuse to recant their “crimes”.

Discussions are underway within China’s highest legislative bodies to reform the system. However, concerns remain that the new system will still fail to meet international human rights standards.

Amnesty International is urging the Chinese authorities to abolish RTL altogether, as the formal criminal justice system already provides a sufficient basis to punish a broad range of minor offences.

Mao Hengfeng is currently held in an RTL facility in Shanghai. She has petitioned the state authorities for many years over her coerced abortion, her right to work, and other basic rights. In April 2004 she was sentenced to 18 months RTL by the Shanghai Municipal Public Security Bureau.

Mao Hengfeng has reportedly been subjected to torture and ill-treatment in the labour camp. In October 2004, she was suspended from a ceiling and severely beaten. In November 2004 her wrists and ankles were bound with leather straps and her limbs pulled in opposite directions. This continued for two days, during which time she was also denied food.

Her refusal to confess to any “wrongdoing”, even under torture, appears to have influenced a decision in December 2004 to increase her original sentence by three months.

Subsequently she has reportedly been held in solitary confinement for short periods, and strapped down on her bed for hours on end. It is also reported that she has been force-fed with an unidentified substance that is turning her mouth black.

Call to action

Amnesty International considers Mao Hengfeng a prisoner of conscience and is calling for her immediate and unconditional release.

Sample letter

Your Excellency,

I am writing to you to express my concern on behalf of Mao Hengfeng (毛恒凤) who is currently held in a "Re-education through Labour" (RTL) facility in Shanghai, and who has reportedly been subjected to torture and ill-treatment.

I am urging you to immediately and unconditionally release her, and to allow her to continue her lawful petitioning about her grievances without interference.

I am also urging you, pending her release, to guarantee her safety, and to conduct a full and impartial investigation into the allegations that she has been subjected to torture and ill-treatment, with a view to bringing those responsible to justice.

I would also like to take this opportunity to raise my concerns on the overall use of RTL as an extra-judicial form of detention. I am calling on you to do everything in your power to ensure that RTL is abolished and that all forms of detention in China accord with international human rights standards, including measures to prevent torture.

Yours sincerely,

Please send appeals to:

Minister of Justice of the People's Republic of China

ZHANG Fusen Buzhang

Ministry of Justice

10 Chaoyangmen Nandajie

Chaoyangqu

Beijingshi 100020

People's Republic of China

Email: minister@legalinfo.gov.cn

Fax: +86 10 65292345

(c/o Ministry of Communications)

Salutation: Dear Minister



Mao Hengfeng outside Shanghai petition office with her three daughters.
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