

DOCUMENTS

Statement of the International NGO Forum on the Human Rights situation in China, issued in Manila on September 1, 1996. Thirty five non-governmental organizations participated at this meeting to consider China's present human rights situation.

The meeting was organised by Amnesty International and the Amnesty chapter in the Philippines.7

UNIVERSALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND CHINA

China is one of the world's most powerful nations, with a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, a fifth of the world's population and a rapidly expanding economy. Yet China's 1.2 billion people face a government that violates human rights with impunity and little regard for world opinion.

Thousands of political prisoners are in jail; most of them are serving prison terms for the peaceful exercise of their fundamental right to freedom of expression. Hundreds more are being detained without charge or trial for circulating petitions critical of the government or publicizing the plight of other prisoners. Unfair trials and torture are routine. There is no autonomous legal or judicial system whose intervention can be sought in cases of violation.

In Tibet, hundreds of people, including Buddhist monks and nuns, are imprisoned for peacefully advocating Tibetan independence from China, many have suffered ill-treatment and torture at the hands of the police. Serious impediments have been placed on the exercise of their religious rights. Members of national minorities in Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang have also been imprisoned for advocating autonomy, for promoting their own cultures or seeking a freer expression of their religious rights.

Rights of association, particularly of workers, are seriously limited. Labour activists are being imprisoned for attempting to organize workers into independent trade unions. Workers who face increasingly harsh working conditions and steadily declining standards of welfare face ill-treatment and imprisonment when they attempt or strike.

Women, including female children, face various forms of discrimination, some of them emanating from China's population policies.

The death penalty is increasingly used; each year, more people are executed by the state in China than in all the other countries of the world put together.

Like some other governments and power elites in Asia, China's rulers argue, in their defense, that human rights are a western concept which is inappropriate and inapplicable to their domestic situation. They have sought to promote an alternative 'Asian view' of human rights based on what they claim are traditional Asian

cultural values. They have also argued that the exercise of fundamental rights must be subordinated to the demands of economic growth and that in any case, these are matters of purely internal concern. We refute these views, believing that they are advanced only in the interests of their own legitimacy, power and economic betterment.

Universality

While governments talk of "Asian values", Asian non governmental organizations have been in the forefront of the campaign asserting the universality of human rights. At the Bangkok preparatory meeting for the 103rd UN World Conference on Human Rights, Asian non-governmental organizations challenged their governments' refusal to recognize the universality of human rights. They issued the Bangkok Declaration, which states:

Universal human rights standards are rooted in many cultures. We affirm the basis of universality of human rights which afford protection to all of humanity... As human rights are of universal concern and are universal in value, the advocacy of human rights cannot be considered to be an encroachment upon national sovereignty.

Following a world-wide campaign by human rights organizations, governments-including those of Asia- ultimately reaffirmed the universality of human rights in the final statement of the World Conference on human Rights, the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action,

As representatives of national and regional non-government organizations in the Asia-Pacific region, we resolve to promote and defend this position. We assert our conviction that human rights are shared by all people, irrespective of culture, religion or gender. We believe that political, economic and social rights are interdependent and indivisible. Respect for the dignity of the person is fundamental to the health of civil society and economic progress in any country.

We therefore affirm that human rights in China are a measure of human rights internationally. At stake is the principle that fundamental human rights are universal standards which governments must uphold, irrespective of local conditions, political objectives, economic strategy or national security.

As a member of the UN Security Council and as a member of the UN Human Rights Commission, China has a special duty to uphold the collective will of the international community. As China opens itself to the world and seeks a greater role in the global affairs, it must accept the responsibilities and obligations that come such engagement. It must take steps to create conditions in which all persons can enjoy the exercise of their fundamental rights and ratify international human rights instruments and cooperate with UN human rights mechanisms as well as to bring its domestic laws into conformity with such instruments. China must also open itself to stripture by regional and international human rights organizations.

In turn, the international community must hold China to account for its appalling human rights record. it must insist that China not only abide by international laws and standards in areas such as trade and security, but also in the treatment of its own people. UN member states should urge China to invite the UN Special Rapporteur on torture, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions and the UN Working Group on arbitrary detention to visit China. They should ensure the regular and effective monitoring of the human rights situation in China by UN human rights bodies. We also ask all states to ensure that such pressures as on China are not sullied by other geo-political concerns.

We are also concerned that, when China's rulers refuse to respect fundamental human rights, they set a precedent for repressive governments world-wide. When they argue that local conditions and economic necessity mean human rights must take second place, their words are echoed by governments throughout the Asia/pacific region. When they seek to block international scrutiny of China's human rights record, they undermine international human rights law and weaken multilateral mechanisms of the protection of human rights.

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Human Rights Advocates

We recognize that upholding universality must assume practical as well as theoretical dimensions. Human rights defenders and organizations must work collectively to promote and protect human rights at the national and international level. We must build alliances and networks to share knowledge and ideas, to offer solidarity and material support, and in times of need to come to each others' defence.

This is especially true of China, where enormous changes wrought by rapid economic development based on the play of market forces have an adverse impact on the human rights situation and on the environment. In spite of state controls, there have been increasing attempts to develop semi-autonomous organizations outside the government culture, some of which include human rights issues in their brief. Most important of all, within China there is a growing number of human rights defenders who take great risks to defend fundamental human rights. They are writers and thinkers, student peasant and worker activists, women working on the issue of forced abortion, journalists, broadcasters and academics. Some of these persons such as Wee Jingsheng, Gao Yu, and Chen Ziming have been subjected to persecution and imprisonment by the Chinese government. These courageous women and men are an example to us all. Human rights advocates in China deserve our unqualified support.

We, the participants in the International NGO Forum on Human Rights in China, call on human rights activists in the Asia-Pacific and world-wide to help us build a broad movement in defence of universality and human rights in China. ■

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