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China: Authorities urged to withdraw rules limiting press freedom

The new rules announced on 6 February, requiring Hong Kong and Macao journalists to obtain prior approval from the authorities before each and every trip to the mainland, is a step backwards compared with the interim arrangement for the Olympics which was promulgated on 30 December 2006 and expired on 17 October 2008.

The requirement for prior official approval allows the Chinese authorities to limit access to the mainland for journalists from media agencies that take a harder line against the government as well as to censor the topics these journalists are going to cover. This new regulation is a structural obstacle that hampers the normal work of Hong Kong and Macao journalists. The control is much tighter than the current media regulation for foreign journalists promulgated on 17 October 2008 as well as the current one for Taiwanese journalists promulgated on 1 November 2008. Both regulations allow multi-entry to China until the permit expires.

China has applied separate regulatory frameworks to foreign journalists and those from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Their treatment was similar during the Olympics and its preparatory period but now varies under current regulations. The current media regulation for Hong Kong and Macao journalists is the tightest of the three.

2009 is a year with many notable anniversaries in China, including the 50th anniversary of the 1959 uprising in Tibet, the 30th anniversary of the "Democracy Wall" movement, and the 20th anniversary of the crackdown on the 1989 pro-democracy Tiananmen protests. All these anniversaries will draw media attention.

The authorities should remove all unnecessary restrictions so that journalists from Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, foreign or domestic, can carry out their profession and report stories in a context in line with provisions of freedom of expression in human rights documents.

Background

On 6 February 2009, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office under the State Council issued the Measures on the Reporting Activities of Hong Kong and Macanese Journalists in Mainland China. Under this regulation, before making any mainland trips, reporters from Hong Kong and Macao have to obtain a press card issued by the state-controlled All-China Journalists Association, through the liaison office of the central government in their localities. These journalists must also obtain prior consent from the interviewed and present to them the above mentioned press cards or resident correspondent press cards.

On 30 December 2006, the Hong Kong and Macao Affairs Office issued temporary measures for Hong Kong and Macanese journalists during the Olympics and its preparation period. Similar to the temporary media regulations for foreign and Taiwanese journalists during that period, this relatively more relaxed regulation allowed reporters from Hong Kong and Macao news agencies to travel to the mainland with a valid multi-entry travel document and conduct interviews as long as they obtained the consent from the interviewed. Despite these media regulations, journalists continued to report harassment while conducting interviews before and during the Olympics.

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