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People's Republic of China: AIDS activists at risk

On World AIDS Day today, Amnesty International is highlighting the plight of HIV/AIDS activists in China who continue to face serious obstacles in their work, including arbitrary detention, harassment and intimidation, and other human rights violations.

Rising numbers of HIV/AIDS cases continue to be reported in China despite more concrete measures taken by the authorities to curb the spread of the disease over recent years. According to official statistics, there are an estimated 650,000 people infected with HIV and 75,000 people with AIDS in China, but the real figures are likely to be much higher as testing and surveillance techniques are limited, especially in the countryside, and entrenched discrimination may discourage many from reporting. Hundreds of thousands of people are believed to have been infected with the HIV virus in Henan and other provinces through selling their blood to government-sanctioned blood-collecting stations in the 1990s. The blood-collection schemes served as a source of income for villagers, but were often poorly managed and unsafe.

HIV/AIDS activists play an essential role in promoting public awareness and education about the disease, helping to prevent discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS and highlighting factors which may impede efforts to check the spread of the disease. The authorities should support and protect their efforts to safeguard fundamental human rights, including rights to health and non-discrimination. Yet such activists have often been the target of arbitrary detention, harassment, intimidation and other abuses. Recent cases of concern include the following:

On 18 October 2006, local authorities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of northwest China banned 'Snow Lotus', a student-led AIDS-education group, after it publicized discrimination against people infected with Hepatitis B. The official reason for the closure was that it had not officially registered as an NGO. In the week prior to the ban, several volunteers had been detained for questioning by the police, including the leader of the group, Chang Kun, a 21-year-old student at Xinjiang Normal University in Urumqi, who was interrogated for seven hours on 13 October 2006. The police reportedly confiscated his computer and other personal files and warned him that he could be arrested if the group continued with its activities. He subsequently fled Urumqi fearing further sanctions. Earlier in October, the group had publicized the cases of 19 children who had been expelled from local schools after they were found to be infected with Hepatitis B. The expulsion reportedly violated an official ban on such discrimination and drew significant national criticism. Snow Lotus had recently been awarded a grant by the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria to help educate people how to avoid HIV infection. According to the official Chinese news agency, Xinhua, the local health department recently released statistics revealing that 6,000 new HIV infections had been reported in Xinjiang over the past year, with 17 people contracting the virus every day.

Li Xige, a rural HIV/AIDS activist from Henan province was detained by the police for over three weeks from 18 July 2006 after she travelled to Beijing to try to seek redress for women who contracted HIV through blood transfusions. [See Amnesty International urgent action, ASA 17/043/2006 and update ASA 17/045/2006]. Following her release on 10 August, she was placed under tight police surveillance and warned not to travel outside her home county of Ningling or talk to foreign media. Both Li Xige and her daughter were infected with HIV through blood transfusion when Li Xige gave birth to her daughter by Caesarean section. Her daughter died of AIDS-related illness in 2004 at the age of nine. Li Xige subsequently discovered that there were more than 40 local women and 10 children who had become infected with HIV in similar circumstances, and founded an organization called Kanglejia ("Healthy Happy Home") to support those living with HIV/AIDS. Li Xige continues to face serious restrictions on her movements. On 21 November 2006, she was detained at Beijing railway station by five officials from Ningling and forcibly escorted home the next day. She had travelled to Beijing to attend a conference on HIV/AIDS organized by the Beijing Aizhixing Institute of Health Education.

On 24 November 2006, Dr Wan Yanhai, director of the Aizhixing Institute, was detained by police for questioning in connection with the same conference which was due to take place between 25-30 November to discuss 'blood safety, AIDS and legal human rights'. He was released without charge on 27 November, but the conference was cancelled.

Amnesty International is concerned that the incidents detailed above constitute serious examples of arbitrary detention, harassment and intimidation, aimed at preventing or discouraging the individuals concerned from continuing with their activities. They may also have a 'chilling effect' on other activists engaged in HIV/AIDS prevention in China. Such abuses risk driving such groups or individuals underground, negatively affecting their ability to engage in public education and advocacy. Amnesty International urges the Chinese authorities to take concrete steps towards protecting such activists from human rights violations in line with Chinese constitutional guarantees on the protection of human rights as well as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and other international human rights standards. The authorities should also make greater efforts to work together with civil society groups across China to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS.