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China: Tiananmen anniversary – looking forward means facing up to the past

When the eyes of the world are focused on the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, many will be reminded of a previous occasion when the city became the centre of world media attention – the 4 June 1989 crackdown on students and other peaceful protesters in and around Tiananmen Square, resulting in hundreds of deaths and injuries. While admiring China's economic growth as evidenced by the rapidly changing face of Beijing over the years, spectators will also wonder what steps the Chinese authorities have taken to right the wrongs of these tragic events.

While the authorities have moved away from branding the incident a 'counter-revolutionary rebellion' towards labelling it a 'political incident', they have refused to respond to long-standing calls for justice by the victims or their families. Global experience shows that long-term stability is best ensured by addressing injustices of the past, thereby strengthening the rule of the law and the principle that no one is above the law.

So far, the authorities have failed to carry out any independent inquiry into the events of 4 June 1989 with a view to prosecuting those responsible for human rights violations and providing compensation for the victims or their families. In May 2006 it was reported that local authorities had paid 70,000 Yuan (approx. US\$8,700) to the mother of Zhou Guocong, a 15-year-old boy who was beaten to death by police in Chengdu, Sichuan province on 7 June 1989. He had been detained for joining pro-democracy protests. Significantly, however, the payment was described as 'hardship assistance' rather than 'compensation'. It is possible that other families may also have been privately 'compensated', but asked to keep it quiet.

The Chinese government continues to stifle public debate over the issue, which remains erased from magazines, newspapers, school text-books and Internet sites in China. Over the last year in particular, official policies on media control and censorship have been intensified, preventing any public analysis or discussion of 4 June 1989 or any other politically sensitive periods in China's recent history.

As the 18th anniversary of the crackdown approaches, Amnesty International urges the Chinese authorities to ensure greater respect for freedom of expression and information by lifting the official ban on reporting about the tragic events of 4 June 1989. They should also publicly account for and release all those who remain in prison as a result of the crackdown. While such measures fall short of delivering justice for the victims and their families, they would nevertheless constitute significant steps towards transparency and accountability. They would also be in line with promises made by Chinese officials to improve human rights and ensure 'complete media freedom' in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics next year.

Concerns over freedom of the press have also been raised recently by the Beijing-based Tiananmen Mothers group which sent an open letter to the National People's Congress in March 2007, urging the authorities to lift a publishing ban on three books that discuss the events of 4 June 1989, including

Searching for the Victims of 4 June, by Ding Zilin, retired university professor who founded the group after her son was killed in the crackdown.

This request was made alongside the Tiananmen Mothers' traditional call for an official investigation into the events, the prosecution of those responsible as well as public accounting and reparations for the victims or their families. The letter was signed by 128 victims and family members of those killed in the crackdown. Amnesty International continues to support their calls for justice.

China's efforts to stifle freedom of expression have not been confined within national borders. In November 2006, the Serbian authorities reportedly cancelled a Belgrade screening of the film 'Summer Palace' which was set against the backdrop of the 1989 protests, after receiving a letter from the Chinese embassy warning that the film was 'strictly forbidden' in China and should be withdrawn to preserve 'good bilateral relations'. Amnesty International regrets the decision of the Serbian authorities to bow to such pressure and calls on the international community to closely monitor and resist attempts by Chinese diplomats to stifle freedom of expression overseas.

Dozens of people are believed to remain in prison in China in connection with their involvement in the 1989 pro-democracy movement, but official statistics have not been made public and the exact number is unknown. In September 2006, the authorities released Zhang Maosheng, a machinery worker who was originally given a suspended death sentence for 'counter-revolutionary arson' for setting fire to an empty military vehicle on the morning of 4 June 1989. Such sentences are usually commuted to life imprisonment and Zhang was released early, apparently for good behaviour after serving 17 years of his sentence. Amnesty International urges the authorities to publicly account for and release others who remain in prison in connection with the crackdown.

The organization continues to call for the immediate and unconditional release of those imprisoned more recently for urging a greater public debate on the events of 4 June 1989 or for criticising official policy on the issue. They include the following activists and journalists, considered by Amnesty International to be prisoners of conscience:

- Kong Youping, a former trade union activist who was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in September 2004 after he had posted articles and poems on the Internet calling for a reassessment of the 1989 pro-democracy movement;
- Li Jianping, a former student leader in the 1989 pro-democracy protests, who was sentenced to two years in prison in October 2006 after being convicted for 'inciting subversion' in connection with essays that he had posted to overseas websites criticising China's political system and advocating greater democracy;
- Shi Tao, who continues to serve a ten-year prison sentence after being convicted for 'leaking state secrets' in April 2005. He had posted to an overseas website Communist Party instructions on how journalists should handle the 15th anniversary of the crackdown.

Amnesty International also urges the Chinese authorities to stop the police harassment, surveillance and arbitrary detention of peaceful human rights defenders, many of whom have sought to commemorate the victims of the 1989 crackdown and call for redress. They include Hu Jia and his wife Zeng Jinyan, who have once again been placed under a form of 'house arrest' in Beijing after they tried to travel abroad to escape tightened restrictions imposed in the run-up to the anniversary; and Qi Zhiyong, who was shot in the leg during the 1989 crackdown and remains under tight police surveillance in Beijing due to his activities in support of others who were disabled in the crackdown.

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