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China: Olympics countdown - human rights abuses risk blighting Olympics legacy

As the one year countdown begins, time is running out for the Chinese government to fulfil its promise of promoting human rights as part of the Olympics legacy, Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan said today.

"Unless the Chinese authorities take urgent measures to stop human rights violations over the coming year, they risk tarnishing the image of China and the legacy of the Beijing Olympics," Irene Khan said.

In its latest assessment of China's progress towards its promised human rights improvements ahead of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Amnesty International finds that several Beijing-based activists continue to face 'house arrest' and tight police surveillance, while activists in other parts of China are facing heightened patterns of abuse as attention is focused on Beijing in the run-up to the Olympics. The report also highlights an ongoing crackdown on journalists, which has most recently extended to the closure of certain publications on Chinese civil society and development.

"The crackdown on human rights defenders and domestic media continues to overshadow more positive reforms with regard to the death penalty and foreign media coverage in China. Not only are we not seeing delivery on the promises made that the Olympics would help improve the human rights situation in China, but the police are using the pretext of the Olympics to extend the use of detention without trial."

The report also highlighted the continued use of detention without trial as part of Beijing's "clean up" operations of the city ahead of the 2008 Games, despite the fact that substantial reform or abolition of methods of arbitrary detention including "Re-education through Labour" has been on China's reform agenda for many years.

In its report, Amnesty International welcomed recent statements by Supreme Court officials expressing the need for greater transparency on the death penalty and unified criteria for imposing death sentences. However, the organization urged the authorities to broaden this approach by increasing access to information on individuals facing the death penalty, particularly for lawyers and members of their families, and by publishing full national statistics on death sentences and executions.

"The application of the death penalty in China -- the world's top executioner -- remains shrouded in secrecy," Irene Khan said.

"Full transparency is essential to help prevent miscarriages of justice and provide the Chinese public with sufficient information to reach informed conclusions on the death penalty. Nothing short of publishing full national statistics on the application of the death penalty in China will suffice," Irene Khan said.

Amnesty International's report, China: The Olympics countdown - one year left to fulfil human rights promises, focuses on four key areas of human rights relating to the Olympics: death penalty, detention without trial, human rights activists and media freedom.

Key findings in the latest assessment are as follows:

Death penalty

- Continued use of death sentences and executions for non-violent crimes and ongoing failure to disclose national death penalty statistics, despite official assertions that use of the death penalty has declined by 10 per cent following the restoration of Supreme Court review on 1 January 2007;
- Evidence that official commitments to introduce greater transparency in courts at all levels may not be being implemented and the continued denial of access for the families and lawyers to those sentenced to death as well as information on their situation;
- Recent official confirmation that the imposition of the death penalty is often arbitrary with courts applying different criteria in different parts of the country;

Detention without trial

- Increased use of detention without trial to "clean up" Beijing ahead of the games, including "Enforced Drug Rehabilitation" and the extension of categories of petty crime for which "Re-education through Labour" is applied;

Human rights activists

- Intensification of abuse against human rights activists in other parts of China, including the death of award-winning housing rights activist Chen Xiaoming in Shanghai on 1 July, shortly after his release from prison on medical parole; reports indicate that he was tortured in detention;
- The targeting of lawyers and legal advisors working on behalf of victims of human rights violations, including the reported beating of imprisoned blind legal advisor Chen Guangcheng by fellow inmates on the orders of prison guards on 16 June. Chen was imprisoned in Shandong province after he tried to bring local authorities to book for allegedly forcing local women to undergo forced abortions and sterilization in pursuit of birth quotas;
- The targeting of activists who try to draw attention to those evicted from their homes as a result of Olympics-related construction projects, including the ongoing imprisonment of Ye Guozhu, who was reportedly beaten with electro-shock batons at the end of last year;

Media freedom

- A continued crackdown on domestic journalism including the continued imprisonment of journalists and writers, forced dismissal of media staff and the closure of publications;
- Pervasive internet censorship involving the closure of websites and recent attempts in one city, Xiamen, to silence protests with new regulations to force Internet users to register under their real names.

Amnesty International has sent copies of its latest update to the Chinese authorities and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), noting that these issues are directly relevant to Beijing's hosting of the Olympics and core principles in the Olympic Charter.

"The ongoing serious human rights violations in China constitute an affront to core principles in the Olympic Charter relating to the 'preservation of human dignity' and 'respect for universal fundamental ethical principles'. The IOC must promote a positive legacy of the Olympics built on respect for human rights and rule of law," Irene Khan said.

"With just one year to go, time is running out before the Beijing Olympic Games are irreversibly tarnished by the China's lack of respect for human rights. The Chinese authorities must press ahead with their promises to improve human rights so that when August 2008 arrives the Chinese people can be proud in every respect of what their country has to offer the world."

Note to editors

After the embargo, a copy of the report China: The Olympics countdown - one year left to fulfil human rights promises will be available at www.amnesty.org

Public Document

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