

CHINA HUMAN RIGHTS UPDATE MAY 2009

Czech Greens for human rights to be discussed at EU-China summit

Ceske Noviny

18.05.2009, 11:45

Prague - Greens deputy Katerina Jacques and Dasa van der Horstova, head of the Czech Amnesty International (AI) branch, today passed a petition with the appeal to have human rights observance as one of the issues of the forthcoming EU-China summit to Prime Minister Jan Fischer.

The summit will take place on Wednesday. It will be chaired by President Vaclav Klaus on behalf of the Czech EU presidency.

Fischer will have bilateral meetings with Chinese representatives.

After accepting the petition, Fischer said he would thoroughly read it.

"I will then make up my mind on whether something can be done for the issue within the bilateral talks," Fischer said.

Along with Fischer, the petition was accepted by Human Rights Minister Michael Kocab.

AI spokeswoman Eva Dobrovolna told CTK that the petition included an appeal to make the human rights issue a vital part of the EU-China summit.

"In the opposite case, if omitted, it will be nothing but a farce as this would forget about political prisoners, torture in prisons and censorship," Dobrovolna said.

The human rights issue should also appear in the final declaration of the summit, Dobrovolna said.

Dobrovolna said she believed the issue would not violate the relations between the EU and China.

Beijing has resented any hints at the observance of human rights in China. Last autumn, China cancelled the planned summit with the EU after French President Nicolas Sarkozy had met Tibetan Dalai Lama. For Beijing, Dalai Lama is a separatist who seeks the secession of Tibet from China.

On Friday, activists from the AI and the parliamentary group of the Friends of Tibet, chaired by Jacques, tried to pass the appeal to Klaus.

However, Klaus did not meet them and the activists left the appeal in the presidential seat.

On behalf of the European Union, the summit will also be attended by European Commission President Jose Barroso and EU Council Secretary General Javier Solana.

The Chinese delegation will be headed by Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. The talks are supposed to focus on trade.

Wary welcome for China's human-rights plan

Asia Times Online

5 May 2009 By Verna Yu

China issued its first action plan on human rights in mid-April, touting it as a major step forward in its efforts to safeguard the rights of its people. While lawyers and rights activists have commended the move, they are also skeptical it will translate into a genuine improvement in rights for ordinary Chinese.

The Chinese government said the 2009-2010 plan "signals that the human-rights cause has become a major theme of China's national ... development" and "will promote the concept of respecting and safeguarding human rights at various levels of government ... and the whole of society at large".

The 54-page document promises better protection of economic, social and cultural as well as civil and political rights. It calls for an end to the extraction of confessions by torture and illegal detention, the protection of detainees from abuse, and respect for the right to a fair trial.

It also calls for the protection of ethnic minorities, women, children, elderly and disabled people.

Nicholas Bequelin, a senior researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch, said while the plan is not a panacea for the wide range of human-rights abuses that frequently occur in China, it is nonetheless a "victory" for the human-rights movement.

"In itself, the plan is no remedy for the serious range of human rights violations that we see in China," he said.

But the move nonetheless endorses human rights - long regarded a bourgeois concept in communist China - as a legitimate cause, indicating it is no longer a no-go area, Bequelin said.

"It [shows] the battles of the norms have been won, that human rights are universal and they are accepted by China as legitimate rights," he said. "It does not lead to any immediate improvement, but by creating a bit of space for human rights activists, in the long term it might translate into better human-rights protection."

Human-rights lawyers in China, who are often harassed for defending dissidents and journalists, have also applauded the official rights plan though they are not hopeful it will lead to immediate change.

These lawyers have said the document only consists of a set of guiding principles - many of which are already in China's constitution - that do not mandate concrete measures that will result more freedoms being granted to ordinary people.

"I can't see much of a breakthrough in this. Most of the issues are already included in the constitution, such as freedom of speech and other rights," said Teng Biao, a lecturer in law at the University of Political Science and Law in Beijing and a human-rights campaigner.

"They are a set of principle-based and abstract stipulations and lack specific workable measures. ... Moreover, little is mentioned about the judiciary or political system, so it's very difficult to have any real impact."

Rights lawyer Mo Shaoping, who has represented many high-profile political prisoners, including New York Times researcher Zhao Yan and democratic party organizer Xu Wenli, said authorities have violated rights such as the freedom of speech and assembly for years, despite them being guaranteed in the Chinese constitution.

While acknowledging the plan is an encouraging move, Mo said he is not confident that the promises will necessarily be translated into action.

"The protection of human rights, including civil and political rights in China should not be something that exists only on a piece of paper. I think what is more important is the question of implementation," he said.

For example, the prohibition of forcing confessions through torture is already stated in China's Code of Criminal Procedure and mentioned in the documents of the Supreme Court.

"These are rules that date back many years and yet in reality [the abuses] go on unabated," Mo said.

Meanwhile, international rights body Amnesty International has also pointed out that in several areas of civil and political rights, such as the death penalty, torture and freedom of religion, the new proposals simply repeat existing laws and policies that have failed to adequately protect human rights.

The action plan fails to address many serious rights violations in China, including the detention and imprisonment of rights activists, censorship of the Internet and other media, as well as the continued use of administrative detention for "re-education through labor", which can be used to detain individuals for up to four years without trial.

Mo points out there are also other major gaps in the plan.

It should have spelt out when China plans to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which it signed in 1998, he said.

The plan also fails to address crucial issues on freedom of speech, such as defining what actions constitute subversion - a blanket charge that has been used to send many journalists and cyber-dissidents to jail simply after they criticized the government or called for democracy and freedoms.

"In criminal law, you have a charge called 'inciting the subversion of state sovereignty' but yet the constitution grants citizens the freedom of speech," he said.

Amnesty International also said China should take steps to address specific civil and political human-rights violations highlighted by United Nations human rights monitoring mechanisms and treaty bodies.

The UN-affiliated Committee against Torture said last year it remained concerned about the continued allegations of widespread use of torture and ill-treatment of suspects in police custody.

Cases that have attracted international concern include the jailing in 2006 of blind activist Chen Guangcheng, who has campaigned against China's strict family planning policy, and of HIV/AIDS activist Hu Jia last year for "inciting the subversion of state power".

"For China's human-rights action plan to have real impact on the ground, the authorities will have to take concrete steps that will meaningfully improve life for the people," said Roseann Rife, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific deputy director, in a statement.

Critics say the Chinese government could have launched the action plan in part to deflect Western criticism of its human-rights record in a year full of sensitive anniversaries such as the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen bloody crackdown on June 4 and the 50th anniversary of the Tibetan uprising on March 10.

The plan may also have been prepared to help China defend its rights situation at the Universal Periodic Review of China at the United Nations Human Rights Council in February this year, Bequelin said.

Bequelin called on the Chinese authorities to stop suppressing human rights activists, allow a free press and allow international human rights bodies to be based in China. "These measures would be enough to tremendously help human rights in China," he said. "If you hide everything under the carpet, the problems don't go away, they often get worse."

* Verna Yu is a freelance journalist from Hong Kong.

“Taiwan Human Rights Map” now available online

Taiwan Church News

2983 Edition

April 27~May 3, 2009

Reported by Chiou Kuo-rong

Written by Lydia Ma

A group of pro-independence and pro-human rights organizations in Taiwan have teamed up to create a “Taiwan Human Rights Map” online via Google Maps. By typing “Taiwan human rights map” in Chinese characters in Google Maps’ search engine, users will now find a map of Taiwan with different locations across Taiwan highlighted using red roses.

Taiwan Church Press happens to be one of these locations and has been enshrined as a place where a battle for freedom of religion took place. Other locations that appear on this map include the site where the Lin Family Massacre occurred, as well as Lo-Sheng Sanatorium. The site of the massacre became Gi-kong Presbyterian Church in 1982, while the sanatorium became the first hospital housing leprosy patients in Taiwan.

According to Deng Nan Jung Foundation, one of the organizations involved in this project, many places in Taiwan have a touching human rights story or struggle to tell. However, a lot of these stories and places have been forgotten with time. Therefore, the foundation is inviting those interested in human rights to participate in this project by logging on and adding more locations to the list.

Organizations spearheading this project are urging people to go online, add locations, write and edit texts that describe what happened at each location, and contribute their own pictures of these

locations.

Taiwan Church Press is listed within Tainan city on “Taiwan Human Rights Map”. According to the description on the map, the organization not only fulfilled its duty as a church newspaper, but also fought for freedom of religion and freedom of speech. It was forced to close and its newspaper, Taiwan Church News, was seized several times by the Japanese government during the country’s colonial era, and by the Nationalist (KMT) government afterward. The newspaper itself also has an important place in the history of Taiwan’s struggle for freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

