

Human Rights updates: April 2010-05-07

7 UPDATES

US panel names 13 countries as religious violators

By WILLIAM C. MANN (AP) – 29 April 2010

WASHINGTON — Saudi Arabia and China are among 13 countries a U.S. government panel named on Thursday as serious violators of religious freedom.

The panel's report also criticized the current and former administrations in Washington for doing far too little to make basic religious rights universal.

That is the goal of the congressional act that founded the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in 1998. The commission investigates conditions in what it calls "hot spots," where religious freedom is endangered. Its job is to recommend U.S. government policies to improve conditions.

It is a "small but critically important point of intersection of foreign policy, national security and international religious freedom standards," the report said. "Regrettably that small point seems to shrink year-after-year for the White House and the State Department."

This year's list of 13 "countries of particular concern" included all eight named last year — Myanmar, also known as Burma; China; Eritrea; Iran; North Korea; Saudi Arabia; Sudan; and Uzbekistan — plus Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam.

U.S. actions currently in force against the original eight include embargoes, often on top of existing sanctions, and denial of military or financial aid. Sanctions have been waived indefinitely for Saudi Arabia, and Uzbekistan has a waiver of 180 days which remains in force.

President Barack Obama's administration has not officially accepted the 2009 findings or named the specified countries as violators of religious rights. Neither did the administration of President George W. Bush between November 2006 and January 2009.

In addition to the 13 designated the worst violators, the report identified 12 countries on a watch list: Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey and Venezuela.

Thursday's report described violations of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia as "systematic, egregious and ongoing" despite limited reforms implemented by King Abdullah.

"In China, the government continues to engage in systematic and egregious violations of the freedom of religion or belief," the report said. It alleged "a marked deterioration in the past year, particularly in Tibetan Buddhist and Uighur Muslim areas."

It had similar observations for the other countries listed. In Iran, it noted "prolonged detention, torture and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused." It said the Tehran government's record deteriorated after contentious elections in June.

The commission's chairman, Leonard Leo, said in a statement that visits to the "hot spots" had found situations "where freedom of religion is obstructed and related human rights are trampled."

He said the report offers important foreign policy solutions that should be implemented. "The report's conclusion is clear," Leo said: "the administration must do more."

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Shanghai's most famous activist kept quiet as city prepares to launch World Expo

Wed Apr 28, 2:47 PM

By Christopher Bodeen, The Associated Press

SHANGHAI - Last week, Shanghai's most celebrated dissident announced he would launch a manifesto on human rights to coincide with the World Expo, China's biggest spectacle since the Beijing Olympics.

The next day, the police were at his door.

Feng Zhenghu's "Expo of Judicial Injustice" was meant to be a sharp critique of Shanghai's legal system just as China's business capital prepared to show its best face to the world.

But the police confiscated the four computers in his apartment. They even removed the cables that gave him Internet access. As they prepared to leave, Feng stepped in front of them and said, "At least give me a receipt." Surprisingly, they did.

Shanghai's tightening security, a reflection of the government's constant fear of dissent, could be seen on every downtown corner Wednesday as police moved into place ahead of Friday's opening ceremony.

The Expo officially opens Saturday and is expected to draw 70 million people to visit pavilions from almost 200 nations during its six-month run.

In addition to Chinese President Hu Jintao, French President Nicholas Sarkozy, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso are to attend the opening ceremony.

Activists and human rights groups say the celebration comes with a heavy dose of police control.

In a statement early Thursday, the Hong Kong-based group Chinese Human Rights Defenders said authorities have been detaining and harassing activists before the World Expo and even sent six

people to labour camps for Expo-related activities. It said some of the six became activists after their Shanghai homes were demolished to make way for the event.

"Police in other cities have warned activists not to travel to Shanghai," the statement added.

Feng, a 55-year-old former economist, became something of a celebrity this year for living for months in limbo at Tokyo's international airport. Chinese authorities, angry at his writings on alleged wrongdoing by local authorities and his support for student protests, wouldn't let him come home.

Feng's odd life in a restricted area near immigration control reminded people of the stateless man played by Tom Hanks who was stuck at an airport in the movie "The Terminal."

With no access to vending machines or a food court, Feng survived on food and clothes provided by tourists passing by. He used a sink inside a restroom to wash himself.

He returned to China on Feb. 12 after the Chinese government allowed him to re-enter the country.

Although he has a reputation for outspokenness and spent three years in prison on charges related to his rights work, he said he's no threat to the Expo, which he said is a positive thing, "a chance to meet other cultures."

But he also saw a chance to speak out.

Feng didn't make clear the content of his manifesto during an interview Wednesday that was repeatedly interrupted by plainclothes security wanting to see journalists' ID cards.

However, parts of the document have been posted on the website of the New York-based group Human Rights in China.

Among the freedoms it seeks are freedom of speech, the freedom to publish and the free flow of information online.

Feng said Chinese authorities should allow citizens to enjoy the rights they are legally guaranteed.

"All I ask is that they follow their own rules," he said.

Despite police surveillance, Feng is free to come and go from the fifth-floor apartment he shares with his wife in the city's northern suburbs.

As the Expo approaches, authorities seem worried other activists will seek out Feng as an ally.

"They think all the complainers will come to me," Feng said. "I haven't even heard from these so-called malcontents."

UCA News - www.ucanews.com

UNITED KINGDOM - Activists campaign for jailed Chinese Christian

Published Date: April 28, 2010

LONDON (UCAN) — Rights groups are stepping up their campaign on behalf of the jailed Chinese Christian Alimujiang Yimiti following the rejection in March of his appeal against a 15-year prison sentence.

The US group ChinaAid is organizing a worldwide petition which it hopes will attract a million signatures to put pressure on the Chinese government for the release of Alimujiang, a Uyghur from Xinjiang province who converted to Christianity in 1995.

He was detained in January 2008 and sentenced late last year for allegedly providing state secrets to overseas organizations. His lawyer, Li Dunyong, denies the charge and says his “offence” was talking to Christians from the US. His wife has not been allowed to visit him in prison and he has reportedly been beaten.

According to the Brussels-based religious rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), those close to Alimujiang say he is a man of immense integrity and, as an agricultural worker, could not have had access to state secrets to pass on. CSW also claims that reports suggest Alimujiang’s trial did not follow due process under Chinese law.

In 2008, a United Nations working group ruled that his detention was “arbitrary” and that he was being held solely for his faith and religious activities. He is pastor of a house church in Xinjiang with his wife, Gulinuer, and two sons.

Since the rejection of his appeal, CSW has increased its advocacy on his behalf. He featured as a “prisoner of conscience” in the British Catholic newspaper Catholic Times on April 25. CSW also arranged for Li and Bob Fu, president of ChinaAid, to visit European Union officials in Brussels and British officials in Westminster to increase international attention.

CSW’s London office said in a statement: “It was an honor to be able to host Chinese human rights defenders. Officials in London and Brussels were able to learn from the experiences of the delegation and hear first-hand information about individual cases.”

Li and Fu also raised with officials the case of the disappeared lawyer Gao Zhisheng. He reappeared at a Buddhist retreat centre soon after the European meetings.

UK09562/1599 April 28, 2010 33 EM-lines (349 words)

UCA News - www.ucanews.com

CHINA - ‘Worsening’ human rights situation in China

Published Date: April 26, 2010

HONG KONG (UCAN) — Rights groups say they are concerned about the apparently worsening situation of human rights advocacy in mainland China.

In its 2009 report, released on April 26, the Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD) said the government's clampdown on NGOs, activists, human rights lawyers, citizen journalists and whistleblowers is a "a serious attack" on civil society.

Last year was a particularly repressive year, judging from "the long list of imprisoned human rights defenders," said CHRD international director Renee Xia.

The organization is a network of Chinese and international activists dedicated to the promotion of human rights and the strengthening of grassroots activism in China.

The report says that more human rights defenders have been detained or summoned by police for questioning in 2009 compared to recent years.

The Hong Kong-based Chinese Human Rights Lawyers Concern Group reported recently that two Beijing human rights lawyers, Tang Jitian and Liu Wei, had their licenses revoked.

The group also cited the case of lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who reappeared in late March after going missing for more than a year. He reportedly said he no longer wanted to participate publicly in the rights movement and wanted to live a quiet life with his family members, who have taken refuge in the United States.

During a street forum held in a busy shopping area, Patrick Poon Kar-wai, the group's executive secretary, recalled his recent phone conversation with Gao and said he believed Gao had been subjected to great pressure.

Poon, a member of Hong Kong diocese's Justice and Peace Commission, told UCA News he hopes Catholics could also show concern for the situation of the human rights activists as well as religious freedom on the mainland.

He said these activists got into trouble because they worked for the underprivileged.

CH09540/1599 April 26, 2010 31 EM-lines (295 words)

Associated Press - April 26, 2010

Tibetan writer detained after quake critique

BEIJING (AP) — A Tibetan writer who had signed an open letter critical of the Chinese government's quake relief efforts in western Qinghai province has been detained by police, according to a fa...

BEIJING (AP) — A Tibetan writer who had signed an open letter critical of the Chinese government's quake relief efforts in western Qinghai province has been detained by police, according to a family friend.

The writer, who publishes under the name Zhogs Dung but whose real name is Tagyal, was among eight authors and intellectuals who signed a letter dated April 17 that expressed sorrow for the disaster

that left more than 2,000 people dead — most of them Tibetan — but also urged wariness of Chinese government relief efforts.

Last Friday, a half dozen police officers showed up at the Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House, where he worked, and escorted him away, according to a blog post written by a friend. They searched his home and library, confiscating his computers.

Afterward, they showed his arrest warrant to his wife, and asked her to bring bedding for him. When his two daughters went to the police station they were not allowed to meet with him, the posting said.

There was no way to independently confirm the accusation. On Monday, the Xining Police Department refused to answer questions regarding his whereabouts, saying it had no comment. The police referred questions to the Ministry of Public Security.

It's unclear whether the open letter was the direct cause of his detention. The Chinese government has been at pains to quash any criticism of its relief efforts in the Tibetan region.

Zhogs Dung, 45, is considered a leading intellectual and thinker who in the past has written books that largely aligned with the Chinese government's views on modernization, religion and culture in Tibet. However, he published a book this year that was far more critical of the government in the wake of anti-government riots in Tibet in 2008.

The letter urged people to help victims by offering food, clothes and medicine but warned them not to donate funds to relief organizations, warning of possible corruption.

"Better to send (money) to the disaster zone with people you trust, because nobody can tell where there's no corruption," said the letter, which was posted on several websites, including the overseas Boxun.com, which is critical of the Chinese government.

"Just as the news from the mouthpiece for the (communist) party organizations cannot be believed, we dare not believe in the party organization, which issued the order stopping people from going to the disaster zone for political reason," it said.

The New York Times

2 Chinese Lawyers Are Facing Disbarment for Defending Falun Gong

By EDWARD WONG

Published: April 21, 2010

BEIJING — Two Chinese lawyers who represented a follower of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement could have their licenses permanently revoked in an administrative hearing on Thursday. The action against the lawyers is the latest move in an increasingly harsh government crackdown on lawyers who take on human rights cases.

The lawyers, Tang Jitian and Liu Wei, said in a written statement that they were accused by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Justice of having “disrupted the order of the court and interfered with the regular litigation process.” The charge against the lawyers is based on accusations from the Luzhou Municipal Intermediate People’s Court of Sichuan Province, where the lawyers defended Yang Ming, the Falun Gong practitioner, nearly a year ago.

Lawyers in China are usually barred from practicing for life only if they are convicted of a crime. If Mr. Tang and Ms. Liu have their licenses permanently revoked, then this would be a rare occasion, perhaps the first of its kind, when a disruption-of-court charge has led to such harsh punishment, said Eva Pils, a law professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

The two lawyers said in their written statement that the justice bureau’s charge “is obviously factually unsound and lacks legal basis.” The lawyers said it was in fact the judge in the court in Sichuan who was a disruptive element during the trial on April 27, 2009. The judge, Li Xudong, interrupted statements made by the defense lawyers or by Mr. Yang, the lawyers said, “so that the defense was extremely difficult to carry out.” The judge also allowed people to film the lawyers in the courtroom, even though this is usually prohibited.

“As an organ with public power, the Luzhou Municipal Intermediate People’s Court should examine its own unlawful acts,” the lawyers said.

The Chinese government has been relentless about quashing any defense of Falun Gong, which is considered one of the most sensitive topics in China, along with independence for Tibet and Taiwan and the Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. The movement was banned as an “evil cult” in 1999 after followers staged a silent protest at the Chinese leadership’s compound in Beijing. Since then, practitioners have been subjected to imprisonment and torture.

The government has been clamping down on rights lawyers over the last year. In July 2009, the Beijing authorities, citing tax issues, shut down the office of Gongmeng, also known as the Open Constitution Initiative, a legal research organization.

In May 2009, the licenses of 53 lawyers in Beijing were not renewed, making it impossible for them to work legally. Mr. Tang and Ms. Liu, who were among them, still have not received the proper stamp that would allow them to resume practicing but have so far managed to avoid having their licenses permanently revoked.

Last month, Gao Zhisheng, an outspoken rights lawyer who had defended Falun Gong practitioners, resurfaced at a Buddhist monastery after having been held in custody for a year. Mr. Gao said in news interviews that he wanted to lead a quiet life for now. Last year, his wife and two young children fled to the United States a month before he was detained. Previously, Mr. Gao had had his law license permanently revoked after having been convicted and imprisoned on a charge of subversion.

Human Rights in China, an advocacy group, called on the Chinese authorities to conduct a fair investigation of what took place in the Sichuan court during Mr. Yang’s trial.

“Instead of the progressive strangulation of rights defense work,” said Sharon Hom, the group’s executive director, “the Chinese authorities need to demonstrate their commitment to respect the

professionalism and independence of the legal profession, a critical requirement for a true rule of law.”

* Xiyun Yang contributed research. _____

Amnesty International

Death penalty report: China must end secrecy surrounding sentences and executions

29 March 2010

Amnesty International on Tuesday challenged the Chinese authorities to reveal how many people they execute and sentence to death, as the organization published its world overview of the death penalty for 2009.

The report, *Death Sentences and Executions in 2009*, reveals that at least 714 people were executed in 18 countries and at least 2001 people were sentenced to death in 56 countries last year.

This excludes the thousands of executions that were likely to have taken place in China, where information on the death penalty remains a state secret.

In a challenge to China's lack of transparency, Amnesty International has decided not to publish its own minimum figures for Chinese executions and death sentences in 2009. Estimates based on the publicly available information grossly under represent the actual number the state killed or sentenced to death.

"The death penalty is cruel and degrading, and an affront to human dignity," said Claudio Cordone, Amnesty International's Interim Secretary General.

"The Chinese authorities claim that fewer executions are taking place. If this is true, why won't they tell the world how many people the state put to death?"

Amnesty International's research shows that countries that still carry out executions are the exception rather than the rule. In addition to China, the worst offending nations were Iran with at least 388 executions, Iraq at least 120, Saudi Arabia at least 69 and the USA with 52.

The past year saw capital punishment applied extensively to send political messages, to silence opponents or to promote political agendas in China, Iran and Sudan, according to Amnesty International's report.

In Iran, 112 executions were known to have taken place in the eight-week period between the presidential election on 12 June and the inauguration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for a second term as President on 5 August.

The report addresses the discriminatory way the death penalty was applied in 2009, often after grossly unfair trials, and used disproportionately against the poor, minorities and members of racial, ethnic and religious communities.

Yet the figures also show that the world continued to move towards abolition in 2009. The number of countries that have removed capital punishment entirely from their laws rose to 95 as Burundi and Togo abolished the death penalty for all crimes.

For the first year since Amnesty International began keeping records, no executions took place in Europe in 2009. Belarus is the only country in the region that continues to use the death penalty. Across the Americas, the USA was the only country to carry out executions.

"Fewer countries than ever before are carrying out executions. As it did with slavery and apartheid, the world is rejecting this embarrassment to humanity," said Claudio Cordone. "We are moving closer to a death penalty free world, but until that day every execution must be opposed."
