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Human Rights and Democracy Report 2013: China - Country of Concern update

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The first quarter of 2014 was a period of ongoing restrictions on civil and political freedoms in China. The climate for human rights defenders and civil society remained very difficult, and security in areas with ethnic minorities remained tight. Ministers, including the Foreign Secretary, raised human rights issues with Chinese counterparts during this period, including at the UK-China Strategic Dialogue.

There have been some developments in transparency around the rule of law in this quarter. In the annual work report of the Supreme People's Court (SPC) to the National People's Congress in March, SPC President Zhou Qiang called for court officials to eliminate judicial corruption, prevent miscarriages of justice, and improve the efficiency, transparency and quality of court operations. In February, the State Council and the Party's Central Committee released guidelines aimed at improving the petitioning system for filing complaints and grievances to authorities.

The outcome of China's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was adopted at the UN Human Rights Council in March, where it rejected the UK's recommendations to abolish all extra-legal and arbitrary detention, and to set a timetable for ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). China accepted 205 of the recommendations made, and rejected 47.

After six months in detention, UPR activist and human rights defender Cao Shunli was hospitalised in a coma on 20 February. Cao was detained in September 2013 and arrested in October on public order charges, after attempting to participate in China's UPR. She was reportedly denied medical access for liver disease and tuberculosis whilst in detention, and she died in hospital on 14 March. Several supporters were detained when trying to visit her. Following her death, the UK issued a statement urging China to ensure adequate medical care is given to all detainees, and to release all those detained for exercising their constitutional rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly.

Restrictions to freedom of expression have continued, with a number of detentions related to online activity. Huang Qi, founder of a human rights website, was detained on 13 March after three petitioners posted reports online about incidents in Tian'anmen Square. Wang Cheng, a Hangzhou human rights lawyer, was detained and interrogated for "inciting subversion" on 14 February, in connection with an online petition calling for

ratification of the ICCPR. Beijing based dissident, Hu Jia, was interrogated on 20 February in relation to the content of hundreds of his Twitter posts. He has since been held under house arrest.

The trials of civic activists associated with the New Citizens' Movement (NCM) began in January, and a number of supporters and activists were detained outside the trials. Foreign media and diplomats were denied access. NCM founder, Dr Xu Zhiyong, was found guilty of "gathering a crowd to disturb public order" and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. NCM anti-corruption activist Yuan Dong was sentenced to 18 months' imprisonment on the same charge. Hou Xin was convicted on public order offences on 23 January, but was released on medical parole. Other activists associated with the NCM and the Southern Street Movement, such as Liu Yuandong, Zhang Baocheng, Zhao Changqing, and Ding Jiaxi, had their cases adjourned.

Liu Xia, wife of imprisoned Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo, remained under extra-legal house arrest during this period. She was hospitalised for heart problems in January, but was not permitted in-patient treatment until February. She has reportedly been allowed some visits from family and friends whilst recuperating.

Following the closure of Re-Education Through Labour camps in 2013, there have been reports of other forms of extra-judicial detention being used to silence human rights petitioners. There have been continued reports of the use of so-called "black jails" (unofficial detention centres), and concerns are highlighted by Chinese media reports that exposed the operation of "Abnormal Petitioning Discipline and Reprimand Centres" in several cities in Henan Province. These facilities were reportedly being used to detain petitioners extra-judicially, and provincial authorities have subsequently pledged to close down and investigate these centres for failure to comply with regulations. There were also concerns around the death under suspicious circumstances of activist Xue Mingkai's father, after he reportedly escaped from a "black jail" in January.

There have been further reports of reprisals against unregistered house churches in this quarter. House church leader Xu Yonghai was criminally detained in January with ten of his congregation on suspicion of "illegal assembly". Pastor Zhang Shaojie remained in custody during this period. His trial was set for 12 February but was later postponed.

We continued to have concerns about restrictions to freedom of expression, assembly and association in Tibet during the first quarter of 2014. There were at least five self-immolations during this period, and further reports of criminal detentions and convictions of Tibetans in relation to events of self-immolation. There have been at least two reports of death in police custody, and several reports that Tibetans were criminally detained for posting pro-independence slogans. Sixteen people were reported dead after outbreaks of ethnic violence and unrest in Aksu Prefecture between January and February.

Religious leader Khenpo Kartse, who has reportedly been charged with activities "endangering state security", is in increasingly poor health in detention in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. His lawyer reports that he is being denied medical treatment for liver and lung disease. The UK called for minority rights in China to be respected in its national statement under agenda item 4 (countries of concern) at the UN Human Rights Council in March.

There have been reports of the continued detention and conviction of activists from Xinjiang. Beijing based Uyghur scholar, Dr Ilham Tohti, was detained at home in January. The Xinjiang Public Security Bureau issued a statement on 26 January accusing him of separatism and inciting ethnic hatred. He was formally arrested on suspicion of "separatism" on 20 February, but has had no access to a lawyer. Diplomats, including from UK, have been able to meet his wife since he was detained, but her freedom of movement and communication are restricted. Three of Dr Tohti's students were also arrested on charges of separatism, and two more are missing.