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China - Country of Concern: latest update, 31 December 2014

0.1 Latest Update: 31 December 2014

The period from 1 October to 31 December saw continuing restrictions on civil and political freedoms in China. The detention of human rights defenders (HRDs) continued as part of an ongoing clampdown on freedom of expression, association and assembly. Security restrictions in ethnic minority areas remained tight. The UK government continued to express concern about individual cases, and on 10 December Minister for Asia Pacific, Hugo Swire, participated in a Westminster Hall Adjournment Debate on Tibet and freedom of expression.

In October, the Chinese Communist Party's Fourth Plenum announced a long-term blueprint for reforms in the judicial system and governance in general. This agenda includes measures to prevent interference by officials in court decisions, a more independent and professional judiciary, and more accountable and transparent government. The plenum put much emphasis on upholding China's constitution. On 30 December, reports emerged of a film director, who had made a documentary about the history of constitutional law in China, being given a one-year prison sentence for "illegal business activities".

In November, China issued a draft of its first anti-domestic violence law for consultation, and announced in December that it would cease harvesting organs from executed prisoners by 1 January 2015.

Restrictions on freedom of expression persisted, particularly in relation to the Hong Kong protest movements. The BBC English language website was blocked in October, reportedly due to its coverage of the protests, as were photos published on WeChat (a prominent social network). Over one hundred mainland artists, intellectuals, activists and writers who had expressed support for the protest movements were detained on criminal charges, including leading intellectual Guo Yushan. Most were reportedly denied access to a lawyer.

In November, prominent Uyghur academic Ilham Tohti had his sentence to life imprisonment on separatism charges upheld. Seven of Tohti's former students were tried on similar charges on 25 November. Six received sentences of between three and eight years; the verdict for the seventh remained unclear. The UK joined the EU and other

governments in expressing concern about the sentences and restrictions on freedom of expression.

Leading civil rights lawyer Pu Zhiqiang was indicted on four charges in November, including incitement to separatism, after participating in a study group on the 25th anniversary of 4 June 1989. Tang Jingling, another lawyer engaged in the study group, was also indicted. Defence lawyers complained of a lack of access to their clients. Political journalist Gao Yu's closed trial on charges of "leaking state secrets" took place on 21 November. Gao's defence lawyer has claimed that her earlier confession was obtained under duress.

The trial of Guangzhou activist Guo Feixiong (Yang Maodong) and his associate Sun Desheng (Sun Sihuo), detained last year after participating in protests calling for greater press freedom, took place in November. Diplomats, including from the UK, were denied access to the courtroom. There were reports of irregularities in the trial, including of Guo being cut off during the presentation of his defence.

Disabled rights lawyer Ni Yulan was kept under arbitrary house arrest during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in November. Her husband, Dong Jiqin, was severely beaten and required hospital treatment. Both have subsequently been released. Human rights lawyer Chang Boyang, arrested on charges of "engaging in illegal business operations", was bailed in November after six months' detention. Other prominent HRDs remained in extra-legal detention, including Liu Xia, wife of imprisoned Nobel laureate Liu Xiaobo.

Reports of detentions and restrictions connected with freedom of religion or belief continued. In November, Zhang Lingxin, daughter of Henan Pastor Zhang Shaojie, who is serving a 12-year sentence for fraud and public order offences, was reportedly detained in a black jail (extra-legal detention centre), but has since been released. Local religious affairs bureaus continue to warn against the hanging of crosses on churches, and gatherings at house churches in Guangzhou were dispersed by police, with worshippers ordered to attend government-sanctioned churches. In December, state media reported that the Islamic face veil and burkas were to be banned in public in Urumqi, Xinjiang.

Ethnic Mongolian activist Hada was reportedly released from prison in December, although is still subject to residential surveillance. He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment in 1996 for subversion and espionage, believed to relate to his activities promoting the protection and preservation of Mongolian language and cultural identity. He was subjected to four years' deprivation of political rights upon the completion of his sentence in December 2010, and arbitrarily detained from 2010 until his release.

In Xinjiang, courts continued to hand down death sentences for terror-related offences. Central authorities have demanded that courts across the country fast track terrorist cases and give "exemplary punishments", following declaration of a year-long "Strike Hard" campaign in May 2014. During a further mass sentencing rally in October, a Xinjiang court sentenced 12 suspects to death in relation to a violent incident in Shache (Yarkand) in July. In December, six suspects were sentenced to death for the attack on an Urumqi marketplace in May which killed at least 43 people, and two suspects were sentenced in relation to a mass stabbing attack at Kunming railway station in March.

Deadly outbreaks of violence continued to be reported in Xinjiang. On 12 October, 22 people reportedly died in an explosion and violence at a farmers' market in Kashgar Prefecture. State media described this as a terrorist attack, while Uyghur exile groups have blamed the ongoing violence in the province on central government policies placing restrictions on the Uyghur people.

There were ongoing reports of arbitrary detentions and imprisonment of Tibetan lay people and monks. In October, monk Tsanyang Gyatso was reportedly sentenced to twelve years' imprisonment for separatism, and the whereabouts of three others detained with him in March remained unclear. In November, four Tibetans, including singer Kalsang Yarphel, were jailed for multi-year terms, reportedly for songs calling on fellow Tibetans to speak their own language.

In November, a court in Sichuan Province reportedly sentenced eight Tibetans to up to five years' imprisonment for intentional homicide for aiding and abetting the self-immolation of Konchok Tseten in 2012. There were at least three reported self-immolations during this period.