

PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

ISSUE

During the past year, the Chinese Government has made progress addressing some human rights concerns. Most notable is the welcome signature of the UN Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights. However, Canada remains concerned about continued human rights violations, especially in the areas of political dissent, religious freedom, administrative detention and in our view, the excessive use of the death penalty. Over the course of 1997, Canada has placed additional emphasis on bilateral initiatives that address human rights, good governance and respect for the rule of law.

BACKGROUND

1997 has been a significant year for China, encompassing the death of DENG Xiaoping, the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the convening of the Fifteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party and resulting consolidation of JIANG Zemin's position as first among equals in China's present collective leadership. In 1997, the Chinese leadership's main focus was economic, rather than social or political development. Moreover, the Government remains wary of perceived threats to political stability and national unity. This economic focus is linked to the need for continued stability, which results at times in a willingness to severely curtail individual rights.

At the same time, through sustained economic growth China has been able to reduce the number of its citizens living in absolute poverty and has opened its society to non-state business activity. Economic growth and greater openness in the economic sphere has lessened the power of the central Government over certain aspects of Chinese life, allowing for greater individual freedoms, including greater control over career choices. Considerable autonomy is now given to the provinces and major cities, while the devolution of power through direct elections by secret ballot at the lowest levels of local government is an important, if limited, experiment in democracy.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China guarantees in principle a wide range of rights and freedoms, including freedom of opinion and expression, as well as freedom of association and assembly. However, article 52 of the Constitution also states that all legal rights are subservient to interests of "state, society and collective." Tolerance for political dissent has not improved over the past year. Despite the medical parole and exile of WEI Jingsheng, many other political dissidents remain incarcerated including Tiananmen activist WANG Dan. The death of YU Zou, another Tiananmen activist, while in police custody is also cause for concern. In addition, numerous human rights and pro-democracy activists, labour organizers and members of religious groups not officially approved by the state, continue to be arrested and detained.