

HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

ISSUE

The human rights environment in China continues to be of concern to the Canadian Government. Engagement is the cornerstone of Canada's policy on China. Our long term relations with China are secured on four pillars: economic partnership, peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights, good governance and the rule of law. All pillars are important and mutually reinforcing. They are not linked in the sense that one is conditional on another. Neither do we rely solely on any one pillar to achieve our overall policy objectives.

BACKGROUND

The leadership transition from Deng Xiaoping to the collective headed by Jiang Zemin seems to be complete. Despite this, the leadership is still wary of any perceived threats to its position and is particularly sensitive to potential catalysts for unrest. Due to its phenomenal economic growth, China has been able to lower the number of its citizens in absolute poverty and has opened its society to Western business. The focus of Chinese citizens is to better their living standard. This openness in the economic sphere has not been translated to greater individual freedoms. The Government, believing that "collective" rights are paramount, has severely curtailed individual rights. Prolonged detention of dissidents due to a series of sensitive international conferences in China in addition to the high profile cases of Harry Wu and Wei Jingsheng were indications of the authorities desire to brook absolutely no challenges.

During the past year, the Chinese showed little tolerance for democracy activists. Many were arrested around the anniversary of Tiananmen Square (June 4). Even more were detained to prevent any dissident activity during the 4th UN Conference on Women held in Beijing this past September. Chinese authorities continue to detain the more outspoken. Illustrative of this case is the sentencing of Wei Jingsheng to 14 years imprisonment on December 13 on the charge of sedition. Despite widespread protests, the Chinese courts upheld Wei's sentence on December 28.

Economic growth and openness has lessened the power of the central government in certain aspects of Chinese life. Considerable autonomy is given to the provinces and major cities, including the citizens. In certain areas of China, direct elections by secret ballot have taken place to select village councils. With more emphasis on a market economy, some of the traditional aspects of the state social security net have been either partially or completely withdrawn as the "socialist market economy" is established. One example is that many rural residents now have to pay for medical bills out of their own pockets, causing great hardship to many. The government is attempting to address the situation by creating a legislative framework to provide a state-run insurance plan.

The Chinese Government chose to become involved in what has been traditionally a strictly religious matter, the selection of the Panchen Lama by the Dalai Lama in March. The government rejected the Dalai Lama's choice and installed their own candidate in late November. The Dalai's choice has disappeared and is believed to be held in seclusion.