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HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in China continues to be a matter of serious concern to the Canadian government and a factor in bilateral relations.

BACKGROUND

The human rights situation in China remains poor, although conditions have eased since 1989. In the last few months, China has released a number of dissidents to respond to international pressure and in fear of action by the Clinton Administration on MFN, as well as to promote its bid for the 2000 Olympic Games.

Nonetheless, repression of political dissidents, arbitrary arrests and detention without trial continue. Sustained torture is not systematically used but both regular and political prisoners suffer from rough treatment and poor prison conditions. Capital punishment is widespread. Neither legal rights nor the legal system is highly developed.

The Chinese government has committed itself to implement a market economy and has continued to carry out administrative and legal reforms. Ambitious plans to reform the civil service in restricting its ability to interfere in the economic matters and reducing its numbers by 20%, have been announced. But however sincere the government may be, its ability to control its police and officials, end corruption and bring about greater respect for law is constrained by the fact that far-reaching changes will be blocked by the awareness of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that an independent judiciary and police systems would endanger its grip on power. Therefore, the CCP has no intention of undertaking genuine political reform. Consequently, it is unlikely that significant progress will be made on human rights and good governance, which will therefore remain a potential source of political unrest.

The Chinese have maintained that Western complaints about human rights abuses in China constitute unacceptable interference in their internal affairs and that majority and economic rights are much more important than individual rights. Canada's view, accepted in the final declaration of the World Conference on Human Rights by all UN members, is that international human rights principles reflect clear obligations under international law on all governments and that civil and political, and economic, social and cultural rights all constitute crucial equally important components of that law. China accepted the consensus thereby accepting the notion that all members of the international community have the right and responsibility to encourage compliance with international human rights standards.

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