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THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

ISSUE

The human rights situation in China continues to be of major concern to Canada. Seeing it improve is one of the four pillars of Canadian policy toward China.

BACKGROUND

Little has been done over the past year to improve a situation which is still unpromising. The incarceration of political prisoners, arbitrary arrests, lack of equity and transparency in the judicial system, restrictions on freedom of speech and on freedom of worship continue to be common practice. Although not systematic, physical and psychological torture is still widespread, as is capital punishment. Economic exploitation and execution of prisoners for the harvesting of their organs, subsequently sold at high prices, are also denounced by international organizations. The latter continue to report regular violations of human rights in Tibet and Central Asia, where the religious practices of Lamaism and Islam, considered a threat by the Chinese authorities, are part of the cultural affirmation of the local people.

The Chinese government continues to institute administrative and legal reforms designed to structure the country in accordance with the rules of a market economy, which China has been pursuing for the past few years. The legal apparatus, tied to political power structures, lacks transparency, and the police continue to be associated with the Communist Party (CCP). This legal variableness is conducive to widespread corruption, which the CCP attempts to curb by disciplinary and exemplary measures. With the death of Deng Xiaoping imminent, it is unlikely that the regime will undertake major political reforms in the short-term, including the introduction of human rights and good governance. However, there are signs that these concepts are finding attentive ears in some sectors of Chinese society. At the local level, citizens are taking measures against the abuses of power.

The constitution of China guarantees a host of rights and freedoms, including freedom of the press, opinion and assembly. However, these are all subject to the interests of "the State, the society and the community". The Chinese government affirms that democracy and human rights are relative concepts that should reflect the national reality, cultural traditions and economic status of nations.

China has accused Canada, the US and Sweden of interference in its domestic affairs for denouncing its human rights violations before the 49th UN General Assembly. China had hoped that by adhering to the consensus in the final declaration of the UN World Conference on Human Rights, it would put an end to such denunciations.

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