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**Contribution of Reporters Without Borders (a non-governmental organisation with
special consultative status) about press freedom in CHINA**

Introduction: Overview of press freedom situation

Since become president, Hu Jintao has consolidated his power base by promoting the “harmonious society”, from which democracy is for the time being excluded. The regime’s conservatives set about creating this “harmony” by force. Public Security minister Zhou Yongkang called on the security services in March 2008 to crack down on “hostile forces”, particularly separatist movements and dissidents, ahead of the Olympics games.

Despite its renewed promises, the Chinese government and in particular the political police and the propaganda department do everything possible to prevent the liberal press, Internet users and dissidents from expressing themselves. Foreign correspondents still experienced great difficulties in working despite new rules giving them greater freedom of movement and freedom to interview from January 2007 till October 2008.

China’s continuing crackdown on freedom of expression in Tibet concentrates above all on those who try to publish, distribute or read the exiled Dalai Lama’s writings. The Chinese authorities are closely monitoring the monasteries viewed as cultural centres supporting Tibetan autonomy and the Dalai Lama’s leadership where underground publications have been circulating. After the March riots, foreign media coverage of demonstrations in Tibet and in provinces where Tibetans live was prevented. Foreign journalists were stopped many times from entering the province and tight censorship was imposed on the Internet and the Chinese press. International radio stations broadcasting programmes in Tibetan were heavily jammed in all Tibet areas. The authorities refused to grant foreign correspondents permits to enter Tibet and at least 25 journalists, including 15 from Hong Kong, were reportedly expelled from Tibet or Tibetan areas between 14 and 20 March 2008.

No Chinese prisoner of conscience was released during the Olympic Games. But several (including Sun Lin, Huang Qi and Hu Jia) saw a deterioration in their prison conditions and

their health. A total of 31 journalists, bloggers and free speech activists have been arrested or given prison sentences since the start of the year. Surveillance of foreign reporters was also stepped up before and during the games. At least 50 Beijing-based human rights activists were placed under house arrest, harassed or forced to leave the capital while the games were taking place.

More than 50 foreign journalists were attacked or arrested or otherwise obstructed during the games. And dozens of Chinese citizens were detained for talking to foreign media. At least 15 Chinese citizens were arrested for requesting permission to demonstrate. Dozens of others, including the blogger Zhou "Zola" Shuguang and the handicapped petitioner Chen Xiujuan, were physically prevented by police from travelling to the capital.

1. Online freedom

The Chinese Internet is one of the most controlled in the world. At least 51 cyber-dissidents are currently in jail in China for exercising their right to online free expression.

More than 20 companies, some American, were forced to sign a "self-discipline pact" in 2007 which forces them to censor the content of the blogs they host in China and to ask bloggers to provide their real identities. Hundreds of websites were closed during the 17th Communist Party Congress in Beijing in October 2007, including the best-known news website forums, in order to prevent any premature reporting and comments on the official line fixed by the authorities. In a report compiled with the help of a Chinese Internet technician, Reporters Without Borders detailed the online censorship system in China. Five government and party departments have sections dedicated to surveillance of the content of websites and emails.

Chinese authorities closed websites in Tibet, including the discussion forum most used by Tibetan students (<http://www.tibet123.com>), depriving them of the means of expressing their opinion about government policies. In July, the authorities closed the Mongolian Youth Forum (www.mglzaluus.com/bbs), which is very popular in Inner Mongolia. One of its organisers said the authorities complained that discussion frequently addressed "ethnic problems" in the Chinese province.

Highly sensitive firewalls have also been put in place. The cyber-police evidently use software that filters words. Without any concern for the consequences for Chinese Internet users, all IP addresses linked to websites deemed undesirable are blocked without warning.

2. Government steps to improve the situation

The Chinese authorities have taken some steps to improve respect for press freedom:

- The attitude of the Chinese authorities to foreign correspondents has become more flexible since January 2007. For example, when arrested by national or local police, foreign journalists are now more likely to be freed quickly if they get in touch with the foreign ministry or Olympic Games organisers.
- The authorities reduced online censorship during the Olympics and stopped blocking access to the websites of such human rights organisations as Amnesty International, Human Right Watch and Reporters Without Borders.

3. Working with non-governmental organisations (NGO)

Reporters Without Borders strongly regrets the absence of independent human rights NGOs in China. In recent years, several NGOs working for environmental protection have emerged, but it remains almost impossible to create and register free speech NGOs in China.

After the riots in Tibet, Chinese government officials and the state media stepped up their criticism and smear campaigns against international human rights groups.

4. Recommendations

1. Release all journalists and Internet users detained in China for exercising their right to seek and provide information. Fifty cyber-dissidents and 29 journalists are currently imprisoned in China.
2. Permanently abolish all the restrictive articles in the Foreign Correspondents Guide that limit the media's freedom of movement and work.
3. Disband the Publicity Department (the former Propaganda Department), which exercises daily control over content in the Chinese press.
4. End the jamming of foreign radio stations.
5. End the blocking of thousands of news and information websites based abroad.
6. Suspend all the laws and the self-discipline pact which lead to content censorship and self-censorship on websites.
7. End the blacklisting of journalists and human rights activists, which prevents them from visiting China.
8. Lift the ban on Chinese media use of foreign news agency video footage and news reports without permission.
9. Legalize independent organisations of journalists and human rights activists.

The information in this report was gathered and checked by Reporters Without Borders, which has a network of correspondents in 130 countries and partner organisations in about 20.

There are countries where journalists can spend years in prison because of a word or a photo that offends. Reporters Without Borders has been working tirelessly to defend press freedom since 1985 because it believes that imprisoning or killing a journalist eliminates a vital witness and threatens everyone's right to be kept informed.

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