



Amnesty International

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Kevin Sorenson
Chair
House of Commons Standing Committee
On Foreign Affairs and International Development
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By fax: 613 992 7974

November 15, 2007

Dear Mr. Sorenson and Committee Members,

We are writing this open letter to all members of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development because our organizations care deeply about the protection of human rights in China.

Effective, meaningful action to address serious and longstanding human rights violations in China continues to elude the world community. We therefore welcomed the important work of your Committee's Sub-Committee on Human Rights and International Development in the last session of Parliament, reviewing Canada's policy and practice with respect to human rights concerns in China.

Many of our organizations appeared before the Sub-Committee in the course of that study. We highlighted concerns and we proposed recommendations. We understand that the Sub-Committee prepared its report many months ago and has provided it to the Standing Committee. We are profoundly disappointed that the report has not yet been publicly released. We are writing at this time to insist that the report be released publicly without any further delay.

Canada's approach to dealing with human rights considerations in the context of our bilateral relationship with China changed dramatically in 1997. Efforts in multilateral settings such as the UN Commission on Human Rights to maintain pressure on the Chinese government to improve its human rights record were abandoned. Nor would there any longer be public criticism by Canada of China's human rights record. Instead, the new approach was premised entirely on quiet diplomacy and constructive engagement with China, the centerpiece of which was to be an ongoing Bilateral Dialogue about human rights between the two governments.

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Our organizations were not opposed to dialogue or engagement. We urged, however, that for such an approach to be effective it needed to be part of a comprehensive strategy that included multilateral initiatives and other forms of pressure. Without that wider strategy we were concerned that the new approach was intended solely to boost trade and investment with China, leaving uncomfortable questions about human rights to the side.

Years went by and China's human rights record did not improve. In fact, in some respects it deteriorated. We pressed, therefore, for the new approach to be evaluated. Beginning in 2000, we urged that review by a Parliamentary Committee should be part of any such evaluation.

In 2005 review and evaluation did, at long last, begin. Professor Charles Burton was retained by the Department of Foreign Affairs to carry out an evaluation of the Bilateral Dialogue process. His April 2006 report identified a number of significant deficiencies with the Dialogue and laid out a number of suggestions for improvement. The Sub-Committee launched its study in October 2006 and continued with hearings through to April 2007.

These steps were long overdue. But the process must be completed. That is not possible unless and until the Sub-Committee's report is released, allowing the Canadian public to at long last engage in a meaningful manner with the important issues that are at stake.

This is a vitally important time for human rights in China. Canadian citizen, Huseyin Celil languishes in a Chinese jail. Serious human rights violations continue in Tibet and Xinjiang. Falun Gong practitioners, health activists, trade unionists, human rights lawyers, democracy activists and people who use the internet are regularly and arbitrarily arrested and imprisoned. Given these concerns and especially now, in the run up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, it is a crucial and opportune time for serious public debate about Canada's approach to human rights in its relationship with China.

Parliamentarians have a responsibility and an ability to lead that debate. The work of the Standing Committee and your Sub-Committee should in turn inform and lead that parliamentary effort. As such, we look forward to the Standing Committee, as a priority matter, agreeing to the immediate release of this report.

Sincerely,

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