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Area: 9,598,050 sq. km.
Population: 1,315,844,000.
Language: Mandarin.
Head of state: Hu Jintao.

An icy blast blew on press freedom in China ahead of the 17th Communist Party Congress in Beijing in October. Journalists were forced to put out official propaganda, while cyber-censors stalked the Net. Despite the introduction of more favourable rules in January, nearly 180 foreign press correspondents were arrested or harassed in 2007.

Reporters Without Borders representatives met for the first time Chinese officials in Beijing at the start of the year, including the deputy information minister. The authorities said they were ready to reconsider the cases of journalists and Internet-users currently in prison, including Zhao Yan, who worked for the *New York Times* and was sentenced to three years in prison on the basis of false accusations. But they did not keep their promises. Zhao Yan was released in September having served his full sentence. And all the other promises came to nothing. At the end of the year, the authorities refused to grant visas to five representatives of Reporters Without Borders who wanted to travel to Beijing.

The assurance given by a Chinese official in 2001 that, "We will guarantee total press freedom", when Beijing was lobbying for the 2008 Olympics, was never kept. It was a year of disillusionment in 2007. Many observers had expected more tolerance to be shown to the press along with greater freedom of expression, as the authorities had pledged. But the government and in particular the political police and the propaganda department did everything possible to prevent the liberal press, Internet-users and dissidents from expressing themselves. Foreign correspondents experienced great difficulties in working despite new rules giving them greater freedom of movement until October 2008.

President Hu Jintao consolidated his power base, by promoting the "harmonious society", from which democracy is for the time being ruled out. The regime's conservatives set about creating this "harmony" by force. Public Security minister, Zhou Yongkang, in March called on the security services to step up a crackdown on "hostile forces", particularly separatist movements and dissidents, ahead of the Olympics.

"PRISONERS OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES"

Police began arresting dissidents and bloggers calling for improved human rights ahead of the staging of the Olympics. The best known of these "Olympics' prisoners" is rights activist, Hu Jia, who was arrested at his Beijing home on 27 December. Police produced an arrest warrant accusing him of "inciting subversion of state power". His wife, the blogger, Zeng Jinyan, and their young daughter got their home surrounded by scores of police. The couple are activists for the environment and the rights of Aids patients and political prisoners and were pushing at the limits of free expression in China by posting sensitive news on their blogs.

Chinese contributors to foreign-based news websites also found themselves singled out for harassment. At least three contributors to US-based news site *Boxun* are currently in prison. Police arrested one *Boxun* correspondent Sun Lin, also known under the pen-name Jie Mu, in Nanjing, eastern China on 30 May 2007 after he exposed abuse of power, including in videos posted on the site. Another regular *Boxun* correspondent, Huang Jinqiu, has been in prison since 2003 after being sentenced to 12 years for "subversion of state power" in eastern Jiangsu province. And in August 2007, cyber-dissident and blogger He Weihua was forcibly admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Hunan in southern China. His family said it was linked to articles published on his blog www.boxun.com/hero/hewh/. Before being released in February 2008, Li Changqing, who had written several articles for the same US-based site, was jailed for three years by a court in Fuzhou, Fujian province in the south-east for circulating "alarmist news".

THE LIBERAL PRESS TARGETED

The liberal press – including the dailies *Xin Jing Bao* (*Beijing News*) and *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, and the

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magazine *Caijin* – carry news embarrassing to local and national authorities. Such was the case in July, when *Xin Jing Bao* revealed that local officials had succeeded in banning publication of a report that put the cost of pollution in China at nearly 70 billion dollars. One month earlier, British newspaper the *Financial Times* reported that the government had censored a World Bank report on China's environmental problems. The article was picked up by a large number of Chinese blogs before it was deleted by the cyber-censors.

“Everyone in the newsroom knows that we have to wait for the story from the official news agency *Xinhua* when there is an issue relating to party leaders, official appointments or international subjects such as North Korea,” a journalist on the *Beijing News* told Reporters Without Borders. “It is much too risky to publish anything before then. Everyone knows what is banned: minorities, religious freedom and Falungong”. The government has no hesitation in bringing the liberal media to heel. The financial magazine *Caijin*, a major source of information to the international community, was in March forced to censor an article on the adoption of new legislation on private property. It also had to remove articles from its website.

Those at the head of this outspoken press run huge risks. Yu Huafeng, director of the daily *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, was released in February 2008 after four years in prison in Guangzhou. His colleague Li Mingyong, the paper's former editor, was released in February 2007, three years before the end of his sentence. They were both sentenced prison for “corruption”. More than 2,000 Chinese journalists signed a petition in 2005 calling for their release.

Other journalists have fallen victim to purges within their media and been reassigned to innocuous publications. Huang Liangtian was ousted from the editorship of the monthly *Bai Xing* (The Masses) at the start of 2007, and appointed to a small agricultural magazine, after he investigated harsh conditions in rural areas. He had also revealed that the administration of a poor region of the central Henan province, had built a square larger than Tiananmen in Beijing. Local authorities called

for his head. “I doubt that freedom of the press will improve for government media and I am sad that my life as a journalist stops here,” Huang Liangtian told Reporters Without Borders. In July, it was the turn of Pang Jiaoming of the *China Economic Times* to be sanctioned by the authorities for publishing an investigation on the poor quality of construction materials for the rail tracks of China's first high speed train, linking Wuhan to Quanzhou.

CENSORSHIP ON A DAILY BASIS

The Propaganda Department and the General Administration for Press and Publications (GAPP) shared out the work of putting a brake on the enthusiasm of journalists. During the year, GAPP reminded the press that “reports must be true, precise, objective, fair and should not oppose the interests of the state or infringe the rights of citizens”. The Propaganda Department stepped up action against the press. Reporters Without Borders compiled an internal document in November which detailed the different forms of censorship. The Propaganda Department warned publications, in the form of a glossary, to comply with “the rules of discipline set up for news”. The instructions are clear: “1- “Reporting banned” means: it is forbidden to write a report on this subject. - 2- “Don't send a reporter” means: permission to publish the standard article from the *Xinhua* agency or to copy the reports, article (contribution) from a local media. - 3- “Ban on criticism” means: no comment on the remarks, including with a cartoon”.

For instance, in November, the Propaganda Department ordered the managers of China's leading media to avoid negative reports on air pollution, relations with Taiwan on the question of the Olympic torch and public health problems linked to the preparation of the Olympic Games.

Censorship was even tougher for TV and radio with journalists working for state-run CCTV receiving a daily warning when they switch on their work computers about subjects to avoid or those to handle with caution. For example, in December, they were banned from covering the case of the

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death in hospital of a pregnant woman, for lack of medical attention. They were also ordered to restrict comment on the assassination of Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, so as to avoid offending China's ally Pakistan.

In the face of press criticism, the government passed the Emergency Response Law, in August, which banned the "fabrication of false news on accidents and disasters and makes the government responsible for providing precise information on the cases within a reasonable time span". Media risked losing their licences for carrying news on such cases without permission. In practice they are limited to publishing only *Xinhua* reports on natural disasters, industrial accidents, epidemics or public security breaches and cannot make their own investigations. In the same vein, the Propaganda Department on 16 August ordered the Chinese media to restrict coverage of a bridge collapse, killing more than 40 people, in the city of Fenghuang, in southern Hunan province. Media were forced to pull out their reporters from the city. Before they could leave, five journalists, including one from *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, were beaten by men linked to the local authorities.

CAMPAIGN AGAINST "BOGUS JOURNALISTS"

The Propaganda Department and the GAPP worked together, on government instructions, on a national campaign against "bogus journalists". Using the pretext of a false report on rotten food by a young Beijing television reporter, the authorities began tracking down "bogus journalists" who were using accreditations with foreign or Hong Kong-based media, to undertake "blackmail and disinformation". The government announced several weeks later that it had identified 150 such "bogus journalists" and 300 unlicensed media. Some dozen journalists were imprisoned, including two managers of a publication in Liaoning, in north-eastern China *Social News* (illegal according to the authorities). If there is blackmail in China, it is certainly the case that very many media work without a licence because it remains difficult to obtain one.

The GAPP took advantage of the campaign to file details of the almost 30,000 foreign journalists

accredited for the Olympic Games. Officially it was again to identify "bogus journalists" and to help Chinese officials respond to interviews. But the government did not specify what type of information would be collected. The filing project was confirmed by a foreign consultant working for the Olympic Games organising committee. The State Security Department has been made responsible for creating files on reporters and activists who could "disrupt" the Olympics.

180 INCIDENTS WITH FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS

News regulations brought in on 1st January 2007 allowed greater freedom of movement for foreign correspondents. Some media immediately took advantage of the change to report on subjects which were previously banned. *Reuters* went to Inner Mongolia to meet the wife of Hada, a local managing editor who has been imprisoned since 1995, an interview which the British agency had been trying to do since 2004. *Reuters* was also able to interview Bao Tong, former assistant to reformist prime minister Zhao Ziyang. But just a few days after the regulations came into force, foreign correspondents were prevented from visiting Zhao Ziyang's children or interviewing Shanghai lawyer, Zheng Enchong, lawyer Gao Zhisheng, or Aids activist Dr Gao Yaojie. Reporters from Hong Kong were ordered back by soldiers on 9 January as they headed to the site of a military plane crash in the south-eastern Guangdong province.

Police obstructed the work of correspondents reporting on sensitive subjects throughout the year, arresting a team from the *BBC World Service* in March in a village in Hunan, where there had just been a riot. "You are not in the United States or Great Britain. This is China", said one of the officers who interrogated them. One journalist told them that the Beijing government had adopted new rules. "That is only for news linked to the Olympic Games and I don't think you have come here for the Olympics," the officer replied.

At least seven journalists were arrested or physically assaulted as they tried to reach the village of Shengyou, south of Beijing, where in 2005, henchmen

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working for local officials killed six people. Those involved were from *Agence France-Presse*, *BBC World Service* and *Swiss TV*, whose correspondent, Barbara Luthi, was beaten by police.

It is as difficult as ever to work in Tibet or Xinjiang. In May, Harald Maass, correspondent for German daily *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and Tim Johnson, of the US press group *McClatchy*, were summoned by a ranking official in the Chinese foreign ministry who told them they had violated journalistic standards in their articles on Tibet. Plain-clothes police had followed and harassed them from the moment they arrived in the capital Lhasa. Tibetans whom they interviewed were fined. Police stopped Harald Maass from entering the city of Shigatse.

The Foreign Correspondents Club of China (FCCC) received reports of a total of 180 violations of the new regulations, from surveillance of journalists to arrests. The FCCC carried out a poll in 2007 in which they asked journalists "Has China kept the promise made by Olympics Games organiser Wang Wei in Beijing in 2001, that, "We will give foreign media complete freedom of reporting. More than 67% replied "No" and only 8.6% said "Yes".

IS PLURALISM UNDER THREAT IN HONG KONG?

Hong Kong still enjoys pluralism even if some media owners have been driven for financial reasons to keep the Beijing authorities sweet. "Hong Kong journalists who report in China have to beware of local authorities and powerful figures who are none too keen on our style of press. Some topics are already taboo, like the independence of Taiwan or Falungong," said Mak Yin-ting, the general secretary of the Hong Kong Journalists Association. "In general China coverage is more cautious than before," she added. Francis Moriarty of the Foreign Correspondents Club explains it thus: "Money is being made in China. It is not surprising therefore that most the newspaper proprietors have financial interests on the mainland." But he added, "The problem is the amount of self-censorship which that brings about. For example Taiwan is now handled under the China section.

And most Hong Kong media do not cover Falungong demonstrations in the territory, even though there are regularly tens of thousands of them in the street". There were several incidents in Hong Kong in 2007: Shuhwey Liao and I-Chun Ko, two Taiwanese reporters with (pro-Falungong) *Sound of Hope* radio, were expelled from Hong Kong and managers of pirate *Citizen Radio* are once again in court for breaking the telecommunications law.

CRACKDOWNS IN TIBET AND XINJIANG

Censorship and police control were more robust in provinces with autonomist movements. Three Tibetans were sentenced to jail for between three and ten years for "spying for foreign organisations threatening state security" by a court in Kardze, Sichuan province, on the Tibetan border in November. The authorities said they had sent abroad photos of demonstrations at the start of August by nomadic Tibetans. Adak Lupoe, a senior monk at the Lithang monastery and Kunkhyen, a musician and teacher, were sentenced respectively to ten and nine years in prison after being found guilty of "espionage" for taking photos and sound recordings of the demonstrations.

In Xinjiang, one of the sons of renowned Uighur leader Rebiya Kadeer, Ablikim Abdiriyim, was sentenced on 17 April to nine years in prison for posting "secessionist" articles on the Internet. According to *Xinhua*, Ablikim Abdiriyim was trying to give a bad image of "human rights and ethnic politics in China".

AROUND 100 JOURNALISTS AND INTERNET-USERS IMPRISONED

China is still the country which jails the largest number of journalists, cyber-dissidents, Internet-users and freedom of expression campaigners. They frequently endure harsh prison conditions: They share overcrowded cells with criminals, are condemned to forced labour and are regularly beaten by their guards or by fellow prisoners. Ill-treatment is at its worst in the first weeks in custody when police try to extract confessions. At least 33 journalists were in prison in China as at 1st January 2008.

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Before being released in February 2008, two years before the end of his sentence, the Hong Kong journalist Ching Cheong, was detained in a prison in Guangzhou. His wife described the conditions there to Reporters Without Borders: "I was allowed to see him once a month for one hour. We were separated by glass and we spoke on a telephone. Our conversation was listened in to. It's even written on the visiting room wall. Ching Cheong is held in a cell with 12 other prisoners, most of them criminals serving long sentences. There are two factories in the prison. He has to work eight hours a day, with overtime twice a week until 9 in the evening, making police uniforms, for which prisoners are not paid. Before his arrest, Ching Cheong already had blood pressure problem, but it used to happen two or three times a week. Now it's every day. He suffers from the military discipline imposed in the prison. He has lost 15 kilos since his arrest. You know the first month of detention in Beijing was extremely hard, he was treated in a way which could be viewed as mental torture".

Cyber-dissident Guo Qizhen, sentenced to four years in prison for "inciting subversion of state power" was beaten in May by fellow prisoners in his cell in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, northern China, after prison guards encouraged them to attack him. His wife said that his body was covered in bruises. The cyber-dissident had a broken leg when he was arrested but did not receive appropriate medical treatment for it. His state of health has considerably worsened.

THE GREAT [CYBER] WALL OF CHINA

The Chinese Net is one of the most controlled in the world. In 2007, more than 20 companies, some

American, were forced to sign a "self-discipline pact" which forces them to censor the content of the blogs they host in China and to ask bloggers to provide their real identities. Many website were closed during the 17th Communist Party Congress in Beijing in October. The best-known forums on news websites were closed "as a precaution" for the duration of the Congress so that no news should indicate the official line fixed by the authorities. Reporters Without Borders marked the occasion by releasing a report, compiled by a Chinese Internet technician, detailing the censorship system on the Net in China. Five government offices have services dedicated to surveillance of the content of websites and emails.

At least 51 cyber-dissidents are currently in jail in China for exercising their right to freedom of expression online. Chinese authorities have closed websites in Tibet, in particular 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 discussion forum *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. Within just a few hours, Reporters Without Borders in Chinese – www.rsf-chinese.org –, launched at the end of May, was blocked. The cyber-police evidently use software that filters words. Without any concern for the consequences for Chinese Internet-users, all IP addresses linked to a website deemed undesirable, are blocked without warning.