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**CONTRIBUTION BY REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS (RSF)
ON THE SITUATION OF PRESS FREEDOM
IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

An independent international NGO that defends press freedom, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Created more than 30 years ago and headquartered in Paris, it has 12 regional bureaux and a network of correspondents in 130 countries.

The People's Republic of China is ranked at the bottom of RSF's 2017 World Press Freedom Index (176th out of 180 countries). On paper, its constitution guarantees "freedom of speech [and] of the press" but in practice the government constantly flouts these freedoms, although it is supposed to implement and defend them.

Under Xi Jinping, who took over in 2012 and recently got another five-year term as president, censorship and surveillance have reached an unprecedented level and both state and privately-owned media are now under closer control by the Communist Party. More than 50 professional and non-professional journalists are currently held in conditions that pose a threat to their lives. Both **Liu Xiaobo**, a Nobel peace laureate and recipient of the RSF Press Freedom Prize, and **Yang Tongyan**, a dissident blogger, died last year from cancers that were left untreated while they were detained.

RSF is furthermore concerned about the danger of China's repressive model spreading to other countries. The Chinese government is promoting its "new information order" more actively abroad, an order based on censorship and surveillance that leaves no room for journalistic ethics and the public's right to independently reported news and information.

1 - Media under Party control

During its previous UPR in 2013, China accepted Recommendation 186.157 that it should "strengthen the measures aimed at guaranteeing freedom of expression and freedom of the press" and Recommendation 186.169 that it should "continue strengthening the protection and promotion of the right of all citizens to publicly express their beliefs and opinions."

However, President Xi has used the “anti-rumour campaign” launched in 2013 to rein in the media, which had begun to cautiously reflect the pluralism of opinion in Chinese society under his predecessor Hu Jintao.

Both state and privately-owned media are now under the close control of the Chinese Communist Party Publicity Department (CCPPD), which supervises the activities of 14 ministries. Every week it summons media editors to a meeting and every day it gives them a list of stories they should highlight and a list of stories they should ignore, or risk sanctions.

Since 2017, the Internet regulatory agency has banned journalists from citing information from social networks if it has not been “confirmed” by the authorities. Chinese journalists are also forbidden to keep a blog or have a personal web page, or cooperate freely with foreign media outlets.

China-based foreign reporters are not spared. The 2017 report of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China (FCCC) said the authorities were making it increasingly difficult for its members to do their work. The harassment to which they are subjected includes being followed, arrested, roughed up and threatened with expulsion. Their sources are also harassed.

A *BBC News* crew was accosted in Hunan in February 2017 by a group of plainclothesmen who manhandled them, smashed their video equipment and finally forced them to sign a statement confessing to conducting an “illegal interview.” In July 2017, a *Voice of America* reporter and his assistant were jostled by police and their equipment was damaged. In December 2017, two South Korean journalists were badly beaten by Chinese security officials while covering the South Korean president’s visit to Beijing.

2 - More than 50 journalists in prison

During its previous UPR in 2013, China accepted more than 10 recommendations urging it to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 7 of which says, “no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment,” and article 10 says “all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person.”

Nonetheless, China has still not ratified the Covenant and continues to be one of the world’s biggest jailers of journalists, with at least 15 professional journalists and 39 non-professional journalists currently detained, according to RSF’s tally. The government no longer sentences press freedom defenders to death but it subjects detainees to “mistreatment” and denial of medical care, in some cases until they die.

Journalists who stray from the Party line are almost systematically accused of “picking quarrels and stirring up trouble” or “divulging state secrets,” a charge that carries a possible life sentence.

- The journalist **Wang Jing** was sentenced to four and a half years in prison in April 2016 because she covered a politically-motivated suicide attempt in Tiananmen Square.
- After being arrested in 2014 for allegedly providing confidential documents to a foreign media outlet, former *Deutsche Welle* correspondent **Gao Yu** was forced to “confess her crimes” on television and was sentenced to five years in prison.
- **Wu Gan**, a 44-year-old blogger, was sentenced to eight years in prison for drawing attention to corruption within the state apparatus.
- Citizen-journalist **Lu Yuyu**, 38, was sentenced to four years in prison for documenting strikes and protests.
- Zhen Jianghua, a 32-year-old journalist who founded the anti-censorship website Across the Great FireWall, continues to be held incommunicado.

Defenders of freely reported news and information are among the leading targets of the system known as “residential surveillance at a designated place,” under which dissidents are held incommunicado and tortured. The regime routinely mistreats its detainees. Nobel peace laureate Liu Xiaobo and the dissident journalist Yang Tongyan both died last year from cancers left untreated while they were in prison.

- Despite his age and poor health, the Hong Kong-based publisher **Yiu Mantin (Yao Wentian)**, who is now 75, was sentenced in 2014 to ten years in prison because he planned to publish a book attacking President Xi Jinping.
- After being kidnapped in Thailand in violation of international law in 2014, when he was about to publish a book about President Xi’s mistresses, Chinese-born Swedish publisher **Gui Minhai**, 53, continues to be held in China and is being denied medical care for symptoms associated with a serious neurological condition.

Observers are also concerned for the lives of other detainees. This includes **Huang Qi**, 54, recipient of the RSF Press Freedom Prize in 2004 and founder of *64 Tianwang* (a site awarded the RSF Prize in 2016), who has been in pre-trial detention for more than a year; **Ilham Tohti**, 48, a non-professional journalist and recipient of the Sakharov Prize in 2016 who is serving a life sentence; **Liu Feiyue**, 47, a journalist and founder of Civil Rights and Livelihood Watch, a human rights website; and **Liu Xia**, 56, Nobel peace laureate Liu Xiaobo’s widow, who has been denied contact with the outside world for eight years.

3 - The “Great Firewall” of censorship and surveillance

During its previous UPR, China accepted Recommendation 186.155 that it should “reform legislation and law enforcement in order to ensure freedom of opinion and expression, including on the Internet.” Nonetheless, as a pioneer of the massive use of new technology in monitoring and controlling the public, the Chinese state is on the point of becoming the world’s first cyber-dictatorship.

China’s sophisticated system of online censorship, known as the “Great Firewall” because it keeps the country’s 772 million Internet users away from foreign news websites, is said to employ at least two million people, (i.e. a censor for every 386 persons). Online communications are now closely controlled: last year, anonymous comments on the Internet were banned and ordinary citizens have been given jail sentences for comments posted on forums or on messaging services.

Thanks to a strictly regulated and protectionist Internet business model, China has spawned huge firms such as Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba and the smartphone manufacturer Xiaomi that are extremely powerful in the domestic market and cooperate with the regime’s surveillance and control initiatives.

China has gradually suppressed foreign VPN services. Apple set off an international outcry last year when it rid its Chinese store of secure communications apps and VPNs, which can be used to circumvent the Great Firewall, and again more recently when it surrendered control of all iCloud data in China, including encryption codes, to a company linked to the government. Apple’s rivals, Google and Facebook, are still banned in China but are actively wooing the regime, and could be forced to make similar concessions in return for access to the gigantic Chinese market.

Seeking to establish a “new international information order” since 2011, China exports its censorship and surveillance tools. A Portuguese-language version of China’s leading search engine Baidu was launched in Brazil in 2014. Called Busca, it blocked content that was “sensitive” by Chinese criteria but, after an outcry, the censorship filters were apparently removed. China is also trying to promote international versions of its unencrypted messaging service WeChat, in which all data is available to the authorities, including the actual conversations.

4 - RSF’s recommendations:

- Immediately release professional and non-professional journalists detained in connection with their reporting, and stop abducting, arresting, detaining, torturing, mistreating, searching and harassing journalists and defenders of freely reported news and information, in compliance with articles 37, 38 and 39 of the constitution of the People’s Republic of China, which prohibit “unlawful detention,” guarantee “personal dignity” and declare the homes of citizens to be “inviolable.”

- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- End the system of Internet censorship and surveillance of journalists, which constitutes a flagrant violation of the right of Chinese citizens to the freedom and privacy of correspondence guaranteed by article 40 of the constitution of the People's Republic of China.
- Reestablish the independence of state and privately-owned media in application of article 35 of the constitution of the People's Republic of China, which guarantees "freedom of speech [and] of the press."

5 - RSF contacts:

- Cédric Alviani
Head of the East Asia bureau
calviani@rsf.org
- Sophie Busson
Head of Advocacy
+33 1 44 83 60 55
sbusson@rsf.org