



# *Action by Christians Against Torture*

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*Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet on earth but yours.*

*Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks with compassion on the world.*

*Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good.*

*Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.*

St. Teresa of Avila

**Greetings from the ACAT (Harrow Group) committee. We would like to thank those of you who joined us in November for the Zoom talk by David Dean of the Barnabas Fund. At the moment it is difficult to say what 2021 will bring and the UK government is clearly reluctant to talk now about relaxing restrictions. However, if conditions are appropriate, we may be able to organise a live meeting later this year, perhaps in the summer. We would certainly like to pursue further online activities and look forward to being in touch with you about this. Meanwhile if you have any suggestions, do contact us. We would love to hear from you.**

## The Overseas Operations Bill: the latest news.

This bill was mentioned in our last newsletter when it was being discussed in the House of Commons. It has now passed its second reading in the House of Lords and is due to be discussed in committee. It causes concern because, in trying to prevent vexatious prosecutions, it could make it difficult to charge British soldiers with committing acts of torture over 5 years earlier.

## China

One might well expect a country as large as China with an economy which seems to be powering ahead to be constantly in the news. Unfortunately the reasons for some of the attention which China receives cause considerable concern. China is frequently accused of ignoring the human rights of many of its citizens but recently the focus has also been on its handling of the Covid pandemic and its treatment of both Hong Kong (HK) and the Uighurs in Xinjiang province.

At present there is a delegation from the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Wuhan investigating the origins of Covid-19 although there are doubts as to how much freedom the WHO team will have to do a thorough investigation. We do know that initially the Chinese authorities tried to cover up the emergence of the virus in Wuhan and were reluctant to admit that, while it may have started in animals, it could be passed from one human to another. It was not until well into January last year that it was admitted on Chinese television that human to human transmission of the disease was possible.

However by then Chinese doctors knew that this had already happened. As reported in our newsletter last May, Dr Li Wenliang, who raised the alarm about it at the end of December was officially reprimanded. He later died of the disease. Since then a number of citizen journalists have been arrested for reporting events in Wuhan early in 2020 and these include our prayer case for this month, Zhang Zhan, who seems to have been ill-treated in prison after her arrest. It is true that eventually China did give details of the disease's genome so that work could begin internationally on treatments

for it and on developing vaccines. However it is clear that in the early days of 2020 political concerns overrode medical ones in the minds of the Chinese authorities (not that they are unique in that).

Meanwhile, unrelated to Covid, journalists and other activists have been arrested in recent months on various charges and other trials are pending, including that of the Australian writer, Yang Hengjun. He has been charged with espionage and was allegedly tortured during his two years in detention in China. There have also been many arrests in HK.

When the British colony of HK was returned to China in 1997 a “one country, two systems” constitution was established so that the existing legal system, which was trusted by most of HK’s inhabitants, would continue rather than changing to the judicial system in China. However tensions have been growing as China subsequently increased its control over HK.

In 2019 Beijing’s attempt to allow extradition from HK to China led to pro-democracy demonstrations and a violent crackdown. These plans were eventually withdrawn but in 2020 Beijing imposed a security law on HK which could be used to target activists who might then be tried in China. Many activists have fled to Britain but on January 6 this year 55 activists were arrested in HK on a charge of “subversion” They had helped to run an unofficial but not illegal “primary” election to pick opposition candidates for the elections to HK’s Legislative Council. So far they have not been tried but there have been other arrests, for example of a group of people trying to escape to Taiwan. A BBC reporter has talked of a “White Terror” spreading across the city of HK.

At least as worrying is the situation in Xinjiang in western China where an attempt by the Beijing authorities to counter possible Islamic terrorism has led to wholesale repression of the largely Muslim Uighur community. Recently attention has been focused on the use of forced labour in cotton fields, (China now supplies 20% of the world’s cotton market), the growth of prison factories, the use of torture, the destruction of some mosques, forced sterilisation and other forms of interference in

the private lives of the Uighur population. A million Muslim Uighurs and Kazakhs have been arrested and discussions are growing in the West about the morality of trading in goods from China which are produced by slave labour.

Meanwhile HK citizens who have fled to Britain are still afraid of being watched by Chinese spies in Britain. Similarly the activities of Uighur relatives who live outside China are closely monitored. In December the US called for the release of Gulshan Abbas, a Uighur doctor who “disappeared” in 2018 and in 2020 was sentenced by Chinese judicial authorities to 20 years in prison for joining a “terrorist organisation”. Her relatives in the US are convinced that her sentence is in retaliation for their human rights activities outside China.

China’s achievement in eradicating poverty within its borders is impressive and understandably she rejects external criticism from countries which may have exploited her in the past. At the same time she does not serve her people by ignoring their claims to justice and to human rights. Too often authoritarian administrations damage their own countries by suppressing people of ability who wish to serve the society in which they live but refuse to kowtow to those in power.

Sir Brian Urquhart, the principal architect of UN peacekeeping forces, died on January 2, 2021 aged 101. He dealt with UN peacekeeping in Congo, Cyprus the Middle East, Angola and Namibia. He was a firm believer in the work of the UN, despite its problems. In his view “the organisation simply has to be made to work”

*Brothers we wish you happiness; try to grow perfect; help one another; be united; live in peace and the God of love and peace be with you.*

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

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