

On the one hand there are an increasing number of States in which the death penalty is no longer used; on the other, in some countries capital punishment is proposed or used to attempt to check abuse against the most vulnerable sections of the population. Free speech may have found a fast track on the Internet, but it is not yet flourishing. In China, meanwhile, the censors...

THERE ARE THOSE WHO REFUSE

129 countries have abolished the death penalty in law or in practice: 89 are abolitionist for all crimes and 10 for ordinary crimes only, while there are 30 countries that have not carried out executions for at least ten years or have made an international commitment not to use the death penalty. While 68 countries retain the death penalty, the number of countries in which the death penalty is actually carried out is far lower. The vast majority of executions worldwide are carried out in a handful of countries. **In 2006, 91% of all the known executions took place in six countries: China, Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, Sudan and the U.S. Kuwait has the highest number of executions per capita in the world, followed by Iran. In 2006, at least 1,591 people were executed in 25 countries.** These figures include only the cases that Amnesty International is aware of: the actual figure could be much higher.

EXEMPLARY JUSTICE...

India's Minister for Women and Child Development, Renuka Chowdhury, has proposed the death penalty for offenders who force children into acting as couriers for drugs, begging and human trafficking. However, organisations working with children in conflict with law point out that increasing the punishment to death penalty can make prosecution difficult. "In rape cases, capital punishment is not considered advisable because there is danger that the victim will be killed. So also in cases where children are concerned, there is always a possibility that the accused will use everything in their power to intimidate the child, maim him or her or even kill to destroy evidence", a social activist says.

Heads are rolling in China too. A man was recently condemned to death for having enslaved hundreds of workers in northern China. Another 28 people were jailed following the trial, held at the Linfen Intermediate People's Court in the province of Shanxi.

The man sentenced to death, Zhao Yanbing, was found guilty of killing one of the slave workers in a

kiln in the county of Hongtong, the county at the centre of the scandal. 95 government officials were sacked after hundreds of people including some children were discovered to be working as slave labour. Those convicted included the owners of the kilns and mines where the slaves worked.

INCONVENIENT WRITERS

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), 2006 was the year in which killings of reporters and other media staff reached historic levels, with 155 murders or unexplained deaths. In a resolution passed on 23 December last year, the U.N. Security Council condemned attacks on reporters and other media staff during armed conflicts and called on all governments to put a stop to such violence. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights guarantees free speech. The best-known case in the world is Shi Tao, the journalist from the People's Republic of China, arrested in 2004 for having sent an e-mail to a foreign-based website and accused for this reason of "illegally divulging State secrets abroad". The e-mail contained a directive that Tao and other journalists had received from the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda department on how they should cover the commemoration of the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Shi Tao was condemned to ten years in prison after an unjust trial. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience.

WHEN THE CENSORS CENSOR THEMSELVES

It is hardly a novelty that free speech is not exactly considered a priority in **China**, at least since Mao's time. Today, this emerging superpower **is the country with the largest number of journalists and web surfers in jail (the Chinese community of Internet users is the second largest in the world and increased by 25 million people from January to June to reach 162 million).** Most newspapers belong to State institutions and must submit to the control of the propaganda department, a body that has offices at every level of government. But the real new



factor, as a study by ISPI shows, is that it would seem that the censors are no longer very proud of their jobs. In fact, while censorship for purely political purposes continues to exist, things are not as easy as they were a decade ago. This is in part thanks to Internet, which is undoubtedly harder for the authorities to control. **Citizens and the very officials responsible for implementing policies aimed at restricting freedoms are increasingly dubious about the legitimacy of censorship, as can be seen from at least two recent events.** When “Bingdian”, a supplement of the “China Youth Daily”, was shut down by the Chinese authorities because the articles it published were too daring, hundred of messages condemning the decision were published on the main websites in the People’s Republic. This was backed up by protests from Communist Party elders and sparked a one-day strike by journalists for the first time in the history of the People’s Republic. The authorities therefore decided to revive “Bingdian” but did not give the chief editor and the deputy editor their jobs back. Another emblematic event was the banning of a book by Zhang Yihe, the daughter of a “rightist”. This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the Hundred Flowers movement and the subsequent anti-rightist campaign, a political campaign that is considered in China to be one of the foremost episodes of repression of the intelligentsia. In other times Zangh Yihe would have had no other choice but to give in; today, on the other hand, the author has written a

letter to the deputy director of the General Administration of Press and Publications and published it on the Internet. This was followed by a lively online debate. Basically, censorship bodies continue to exist and the Party still exercises its monopoly over the media and publishing houses and employs tens of thousands of officials to impose its censorship. What has changed is that, when subjected to pressure from public opinion, the heads of censorship bodies perceive that their task is unpopular and hard to justify. And society now views victims of censorship with sympathy.

2007: THE YEAR OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

51 per cent of Europeans believe that not enough is being done to fight discrimination in their country, although the percentage varies substantially from one country to the next. This emerges from a survey commissioned by the European Union when it designated 2007 the “European Year of Equal Opportunities for All”. **The most common form appears to be discrimination based on ethnic origin, followed in descending order by discrimination based on disability and sexual orientation.** Next come discrimination based on age (46%) and religion or beliefs (44%). The study also highlights the chronic lack of laws to protect people against discrimination, except for laws safeguarding the employment of the disabled.