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PEN Canada Freedom of Expression Countdown from December 10 (International Human Rights Day) to August 8, Olympics Opening Day

40:242

Major powers in the world find it easy to get away with false promises and human rights violations. I'm not talking about the U.S. here, but China – Leonard Cohen's country of "tea and oranges" – the place that continues to fascinate and terrify. When China made its bid in 2001 for the Olympics, it promised the world and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that the games would "help the development of human rights" in their country. It further assured us all that "there will be no restrictions on media reporting and movement of journalists up to and including the Olympic Games."

False or true – promises are brazenly broken as human rights abuses, including those against freedom of expression, persist in China. However, instead of outrage, there is silence from those who heard the promises. And this goes hand in hand with the acquiescence and indifference of many nations and the IOC.

Intrepid human rights campaigners anticipate no change in China's policies between now and the Olympics. Some predict that the situation will get worse, not better. There was supposedly a 'human rights dialogue' between China and the European Union but that hasn't produced any results. And any dialogue between Canada and China went from cold to deep freeze, especially since Canada offered a warm reception to Dalai Lama's visit earlier this fall.

In late November, senior IOC official and European parliament member Pal Schmitt braved the indifference and said, "It is time for a political statement," from the IOC. But so far, silence, and business as usual in China, especially for Internet providers. And the media's interest in the Olympics turns to tourism, the economy, the weather and the excitement of tracking athletes in training.

In the game of 'human rights' vs 'business', the former is already the defeated party. But accepting this and not saying or doing anything would only further confirm an enormous tactical victory for China as it attempts to silence criticism. And the world will fall deeper and deeper under the cover of self-censorship and complacency. To remain silent will surely exacerbate the troubles for the Chinese people after the Games as well. And that's because if at a time when the world can demand that the Chinese government fulfill its promises we choose not to speak but let the chance pass, there is no reason why the

Chinese government would take this matter seriously after the Games. In fact, after the Games, human rights offenses could easily be declared “internal matters”, making it more difficult for anyone to oppose oppressive policies.

Now is the time to raise our voices in favour of respect for the dignity of all humans, including the Chinese who deserve to live in an equal and free society. Today, on International Human Rights Day, PEN Canada, PEN American Center, Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC) and other centers are launching the 40:242 campaign.

Today the most recent casebook of the Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) of International PEN lists 40 cases of writers imprisoned in China. There are 242 days between now and the Olympic opening day on August 8, 2008. The 40:242 campaign is a countdown to the opening ceremonies, with the objective of freedom for 40 individuals who are behind bars for exercising their basic and most fundamental right of expression.

PEN Canada follows closely nine of these 40 cases, adopted as “honorary members” of the centre. Litanies of freedom of expression abuses have a hypnotic, repetitive quality; it is the names and the details of the individuals detained that stick. Of PEN Canada’s nine honorary members, **Nurehamet Yasin** is serving a ten-year sentence for the publication of a single short story; **Tongyan Yang** is serving twelve years for subversion, having previously been in prison for ten years, almost half of his life so far. **Shi Tao** is a journalist and poet serving ten years for posting notes online; he suffers ill health from forced labour. **Tohti Tunyaz** is a Uighur historian serving 11 years for “inciting national disunity.” **Shigen Hu** is serving 20 years for “counterrevolutionary crimes” and suffers from malnutrition; he is rarely allowed to see his family. The Tibetan monk **Ven. Ngawang Phulchung** was released in November, a contemptuous six months before the end of a 19-year sentence for producing leaflets which “venomously slandered the people’s democratic dictatorship.”

These 40 individual stories are emblematic of systemic repression. Reporters without Borders (RSF) recently confirmed that “At least 30 journalists and 50 Internet users are currently detained in China. The government blocks access to thousands of news websites. It jams the Chinese, Tibetan and Uyghur-language programmes of 10 international radio stations....”

The “Great Firewall of China” restricts access to the Internet (for an estimated 123 million users), but also to all other media in the name of safeguarding “national, social and collective interests.” The great defenders of the free use of the Internet, corporations like Google, Microsoft, Yahoo! and Skype, have supported the Chinese government in creating search and censorship protocols. Yahoo! released the identities of private users to Chinese authorities, thus contributing to lengthy prison sentences in at least four PEN cases. In November Yahoo! settled a civil suit with payment for families of two of the imprisoned writers; called a “stoolpigeon” in a recent NY Times editorial, Yahoo! claims

to have only followed the rules of its host.

In addition to the crackdowns on its citizens, China has created arcane regulations for foreign journalists and news agencies, required to seek approval from China's official news agency in order to publish news. Many foreign journalists have been harassed and detained for short periods, and the "temporary regulations" governing access expire on October 17, 2008. Those temporary regulations do not protect Chinese reporters, researchers and translators on whom foreign correspondents must depend.

In August 2007, the Chinese government launched a major publicity offensive for the Olympics under the bright, upbeat slogan "We Are Ready!" The PEN campaign challenges that public relations effort by reminding the world that surely the Chinese people are also "Ready for Freedom of Expression." The Chinese authorities have 242 days until the opening ceremonies to release the 40 writers and journalists currently languishing in Chinese prisons. And we have a greater responsibility to make sure the voices of freedom are not sentenced to the death of eternal silence.

—*Nelofer Pazira, president of PEN Canada*