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For more information contact:

Larry Siems, PEN American Center, (212) 334-1660 ext. 105, lsiems@pen.org

Isobel Harry, PEN Canada, (416) 703-8448 ext. 22, iharry@pencanada.ca

Yu Zhang, Independent Chinese PEN Center, +46-8-50022792, wipc@penchinese.net

PEN to China: Let free press tell true story in Tibet

New York, Toronto, Stockholm, March 17, 2008 – Writers from Canada, the United States, and China joined today in denouncing “suffocating restrictions” on the press and on the flow of information from Tibet, where a week of protests and repression has reportedly resulted in as many as 100 deaths in Lhasa and other Tibetan cities. Warning that news blackouts, communications interruptions and censorship remove a critical deterrent to human rights abuses and increase suspicions of official wrongdoing, the representatives of PEN Canada, PEN American Center, and the Independent Chinese PEN Center demanded the Chinese government provide immediate and unfettered access to the Tibet Autonomous Region and all traditionally Tibetan areas in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan provinces to international journalists; restore phone and Internet access; and end all domestic censorship of international news feeds and Internet reports from Tibet.

The Chinese government has long prevented international journalists from reporting freely from Tibet. For instance, CNN reports its crews have been allowed into the region only twice in the past 10 years and never without tight controls on conversations and interviews. No international journalists have been allowed to enter or report from Tibet since Buddhist monks staged peaceful demonstrations last week to protest continuing restrictions on religious and cultural activities in Tibet, and there have been reports of significant interruptions of telephone and Internet service in Lhasa and other Tibetan areas since then, impeding the flow of first-hand reports and other information as violence spread and the number of deaths rose. Meanwhile, satellite broadcasts focusing on events in Tibet this past week have reportedly been jammed in Beijing and other Chinese cities, and entire news sites such as the LA Times and The Guardian have been shut down, leaving China’s citizens in the dark about the unfolding tragedy.

“This is reminding us of what happened both in Lhasa in March and in Beijing in June 19 years ago,” recalled Dr. Yu Zhang, Secretary-general of Independent Chinese PEN Center. “As the truth of bloody Lhasa event in 1989 was little known beyond the region due to the governmental restrictions on the press, Chinese people could prepare nothing to prevent the similar bloodshed from being reproduced in Beijing and elsewhere in China a few months later. It is unforgivable to allow history to repeat itself when the whole world is now watching Beijing for its promise of the press freedom and openness once more.”

“‘One World, One Dream’ is the motto of the Beijing Olympics,” noted Nelofer Pazira, president of PEN Canada. “But it seems that Tibetans are not included in that dream, as the denial of their human rights and now this violent crushing of these protests indicate. And the rest of the world is not being allowed to know that.”

“The Chinese government pledged to the world that there will be no restrictions on media reporting and movement of journalists up to and including the Olympic Games – a pledge that’s

completely undermined by its conduct in Tibet,” said Francine Prose, President of PEN American Center. “Even with the limited information emanating from Tibet, it is clear the Chinese government has responded aggressively to what apparently began as peaceful demonstrations. The Chinese government’s suffocating restrictions on news reporting only fuel suspicions that its actions go beyond what is necessary to protect public safety and amount to another violent crackdown on free expression and dissent.”

PEN American Center, PEN Canada, and the Independent Chinese PEN Center are among the 145 worldwide centers of International PEN, an organization that works to promote friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers everywhere, to fight for freedom of expression, and represent the conscience of world literature. On December 10, 2007, the centers launched We Are Ready for Freedom of Expression, an Olympic countdown campaign to protest China’s imprisonment of at least 38 writers and journalists, including three Tibetans, and to seek an end to internet censorship and other restrictions on the freedom to write in that country. For more information, please visit www.pen.org, www.pencanada.ca, and www.chinesepen.org.

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