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PEN Condemns New Detention of Cyber-Dissident in China 231 Days Before the Olympics, Number of Jailed Writers Rises to 41

New York, Toronto, December 20, 2007 – Writers in the United States and Canada joined Chinese colleagues today in condemning China’s latest detention of a dissident for online commentaries about human rights in China. With the arrest of Wang Deji (pen name Jing Chu), the total number of writers PEN believes are unjustly imprisoned in China has risen to 41, one more than when PEN launched its “We Are Ready for Freedom of Expression” campaign earlier this month. The jailing of Mr. Wang, whose articles specifically criticized the pre-Olympics climate in his country, raised new doubts over China’s pledge to the International Olympic Committee and to the world to guarantee press freedom and freedom of expression in the lead-up to the 2008 Games.

“It is certainly disconcerting that despite its promises of press freedom, the Chinese government is instead continuing to tighten its control over the media,” said Larry Siems, Director of the Freedom to Write and International Programs at PEN American Center. “As the Games approach, the number of writers in prison should be dwindling, not rising. We fear that Wang Deji’s arrest may be the first of many in a final push to clamp down on dissent within China before August 8, 2008.”

According to PEN’s information, Guangxi-based dissident writer Wang Deji was arrested at his home in Guilin on December 13, 2007 and taken to the Quanzhou Chengbei police station, where he is being held on suspicion of “inciting subversion of state power.” His family believes his detention is directly related to his articles published online on the Minzhu Luntan (Democracy Forum) website, which criticized the government’s human rights situation as it prepares for the Olympic Games. Wang’s wife also reports that in October 2007 he met with U.S. Embassy officials to discuss human rights in China.

"I had some conversations with Mr. Wang on the issue of freedom of expression in China some time ago," recalled Dr. Yu Zhang, Secretary-general and Writers in Prison Committee Coordinator of the Independent Chinese PEN Center. "His detention has shocked me and my colleagues worldwide as he has been a well-known human rights defender in China. What a shame for the Olympics in Beijing!"

In August 2007, the Chinese government launched a major publicity offensive for the Olympics under the slogan “We Are Ready.” PEN’s campaign, an initiative led by the Independent Chinese PEN Center and PEN centers in the US and Canada, counters that public relations effort by reminding the world that China continues to deny its citizens the fundamental right to freedom of expression and suggesting that Chinese authorities now have 231 days until the opening ceremonies to release 41 writers and journalists currently languishing in Chinese prisons in order to live up to its pre-Olympics promises to improve its human rights record.

“As the world turns its gaze on China before the Olympics, China now has a grand opportunity to advance the cause of freedom of expression within its borders,” said Isobel Harry, Executive Director of PEN Canada. “Instead, China continues to demonstrate that it is a state that does not trust its citizens to speak and act for themselves, as it chooses to control information by criminalizing the peaceful expression of opinions.”

View PEN's China campaign, "We Are Ready for Freedom of Expression: Countdown to the Beijing Olympics," at www.pen.org and www.pencanada.ca

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