



Emergency committee for human rights in Singapore

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SINGAPORE HUMAN RIGHTS ALERT

Some Releases & More "Confessions" Expected. Focus on Internal Security Act (ISA).

"CONFESSIONS" & RELEASES

As expected one forced "confession" has been televised to date and there are rumours of the impending release of some of the detainees. These rumours are always most intense shortly before the 30 day limit (28 days plus 48 hours) by which time the authorities must issue a detention order or release the detainees. That deadline is June 20 (early morning Singapore time).

This hope of release is used by the Singapore government to prevent active protest by the detainees' families and community groups. But it is doubtful that more than a few, if any, will be released in the short term.

ISA REMAINS

Whatever happens on June 20, the faithful work and the reputations of the detainees have been destroyed along with their organisations. Also, the repressive Internal Security Act remains with its provisions for detention without trial at the whim of the government. It is the task of all those who urge the release of the "Singapore 16" to ensure that this legislation is the object of a sustained international campaign to ensure that it is difficult, if not impossible, for it to be used again.

THE "VINCENT CHENG SHOW"

For 85 minutes from 9.30 pm on Tuesday 9 June, Singapore TV showed the forced "confession" of Vincent Cheng. Four government journalists interviewed him. It took the form of a pseudo-academic discussion of religion and politics and added nothing new to the vague charges already made by the government. Mr Cheng made clear his opposition to violent change in Singapore. Asked whether Mr Tan Wah Piow had offered him a post after his planned takeover of the government, Mr Cheng replied good humouredly that he supposed he might be made Minister of Religion.

Asked who would have agreed with what he did, Mr Cheng said that Fathers Goh, Ho and D'Souza would have agreed but that he did not inform them of his undeclared intentions. (This fits the pattern of being forced to implicate others in confessions.)

The "confession" concluded with an apology for using the church and for manipulating young people. Wednesday morning's STRAITS TIMES carried the headline "What I did for Wah Piow".

It is unlikely that the public were at all convinced by the confession since the editing of the tapes was done so poorly. Mr Cheng was at times cut off in mid sentence or there was no sound while his lips were moving showing clear censorship. Parts were also obviously rehearsed. However, the public have been left in no doubt about the severe repression exercised against anyone who questions government policies. UPDATE is awaiting a video recording of the "confession" and will report further.

NO LAWYER

Mr Cheng never saw a lawyer. He discharged his newly appointed lawyer on Friday 5 June before they met. Several other detainees also have no lawyer. It is said they feel there is no use in getting one since the government will do what it wants anyway. Also the families have been under continuous pressure from the government not to "complicate" matters by getting lawyers. Lawyers are also expensive.

DEAL OFFERED

Ms TEO Soh Lung, the detained senior lawyer, has reportedly been offered a deal: release in return for quitting the Law Society Council and all political involvement. This shows clearly why the detentions were made. The government is afraid of its electoral unpopularity and the appeal of a new generation of community leaders. Anyway it is an inconsequential offer since all detainees are deprived of their civil rights to some degree on release (restricted place of residence, hours permitted outside their apartment, work, travel, political rights, reporting to police, and continued government pressure on family members in terms of housing, education, promotion, business ventures etc.).

PRIESTS ESCAPE

Two of the priests who were forced to resign, Fr Arotcarena and Fr Edgar D'Souza are said to be in France and Australia respectively. Fr D'Souza has been speaking to the Australian media, church groups and government. The other two priests who resigned, Fr Joseph Ho and Fr Patrick Goh, are said to be in Malaysia and Canada.

AFRAID OF INTERNATIONAL CENSURE

The Singapore government is sending emissaries around the world to boost its image in the wake of this repressive action. Dr Lau Teik Soon, a government MP and political scientist at the National University of Singapore, has been dispatched to New Zealand and will address the NZ Institute of International Affairs at 5.30 pm on Thursday 25 June in Wellington.

MALAYSIAN BISHOPS OBJECT STRONGLY

On 3 June the Catholic Archbishop of Malaysia, Archbishop Soter Fernandez, called on the Singapore government to release all the 16 people detained under the ISA "pending due process of law and justice". "In view of the recent press release from Singapore concerning the deposition of Mr Vincent Cheng, we insist all the more that the evidence be brought to open court," Archbishop Fernandez said in a joint statement with Bishop J Chan and Bishop A Selvanayagam. The bishops said they were deeply concerned about the allegations made against the Church organisations by the Singapore government. The Archbishop further revealed that 120 national Catholic charitable organisations met in Rome the previous week and sent a telegram to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew requesting immediate release of the 16 pending due process of law and justice.

JOURNALISTS DISAPPROVE

Also on June 3 the National Union of Journalists in Malaysia expressed its disappointment with the stand taken by Archbishop Gregory Yong of Singapore who appeared to accept the government's "evidence" against Mr Vincent Cheng. NUJ Secretary-General, Mr GOH Kay Chong, said the archbishop had "no basis" for agreeing with the information disclosed by the Singapore Government including the so-called "admission" because such statements were made under extreme duress and not of Mr Cheng's own free will in the presence of a lawyer.

He said it would have been more appropriate if the archbishop had stood firm on the ground that nobody was guilty until proven so. Mr Goh said he hoped the public would not be misled by the archbishop's stand.

BANNED EDITION AVAILABLE

The June 14 issue of THE CATHOLIC NEWS of Singapore has been received by UPDATE. It contains clear descriptions of the organisations to which the detainees belonged and of their activities. It attests to the characters of those detained. It was banned by Archbishop Yong after his meeting with Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

SINGAPORE OPPOSITION LEADER SPEAKS OUT AGAIN

Soon after his arrest for demonstrating against the detentions of the "Singapore 16", Workers' Party Secretary-General, Mr J B Jeyaretnam held a press conference on June 3 demanding that the government release them. He said that the fact that the government would not take the 16 to court proved that there was no evidence against them. He further pointed out that the Prime Minister's statement did not contain a word that the government had evidence that the detainees were planning violent action or were preparing to create mass unrest or violence to threaten Singapore's security. He said only such crimes justified the use of the ISA.

TIMELY WAGE CUT

The Singapore government has announced an extremely unpopular measure at the same time as it exhibits its power to crush opposition. Singapore's public servants, 133,000 of them, have not received a wage increase since 1984. It has been announced that the increase they received in 1984 will be cut by 30% from July. Also the customary 2 weeks' bonus will not be given this year. It is interesting to note that the 16 detainees were engaged in exposing the hardships of ordinary wage earners until their arrest.

INTERNATIONAL ACTION

Philippines - a coalition under the banner "Free the Singapore 16" has been formed made up of church and action groups. They have launched a petition, held a prayer vigil outside the Singapore Embassy and arranged a press conference.

Hongkong - a strong coalition of Catholic organisations and Asia regional organisations based in Hongkong have launched a number of protests including public meetings, prayers in local churches, handing a petition to the Singapore High Commission and sending a letter to Mr Lee Kuan Yew. On Friday 12 June the coalition met to consider long-term actions.

Malaysia - Another Malaysian group has spoken out; the Perak Education and Research Association for Consumers (ERA). Spokesperson Puan Josie Zaini said on June 3 that specific charges should be brought against the detainees. "Unless this is done, the Singapore Government will be condemned by all people who cherish liberty and the right to dissent... The only crime of the 16 appears to be their expression of views which were contrary to the Singapore Government's and surely this is not reason enough to detain them without trial in a democratic country."

Thailand - Nine groups involved in human rights, religious affairs and student work led by civil rights lawyer Mr Thongbai Thongpao presented a letter to the Singapore Embassy on 27 May requesting due process of law with regard to the detainees. The letter also expressed concern for the welfare of the detainees while in the hands of the security police.

Japan - In addition to action by churches and ecumenical bodies in Tokyo, a coalition on human rights in Singapore has been formed in Kyoto with prominent lawyers, academics and community leaders.

Korea - the National Council of Churches and related human rights organisations have sent strong protests to the Singapore government.

Australia - Many groups, especially in Melbourne and Sydney, have taken up the detentions and have launched campaigns for their release.

Aotearoa/New Zealand - Protest letters have been sent to the Singapore Government by the National Council of Churches and the Catholic Commission for Evangelisation, Justice and Development. The staff of the Law Faculties of the Universities of Auckland, Victoria (Wellington) and Canterbury (Christchurch) have signed open letters to the Singapore High Commission seeking the immediate release of the detainees. They stated "As citizens and jurists of a Commonwealth democracy committed to the rule of law we cannot condone the deprivation of liberty of any person without charge, the refusal of their right of free and confidential access to legal representation, or the denial of their right to a hearing of specific charges according to due process before an impartial court of law".

Hawaii - the American Friends' Service Committee has begun to raise the issue and to protest to the Singapore government.

Washington - The human rights organisation, ASIA WATCH, is working intensively on the issue and has condemned the arrests. According to Asia Watch Vice-Chairperson Aryeh Neier, "The actions of the government are extraordinary. Those arrested include Catholic lay workers, journalists, lawyers and businesspersons, who were involved in peaceful social and political activities pursued through established and legally recognised organisations. We believe they are imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their political opinions."

"The government has issued several written statements detailing its accusations. We find those statements completely unconvincing, and we are aware of no evidence that those arrested either planned or advocated violent political change in Singapore." The statement concluded by calling for a strong response from the US Government.

New York - Catholic organisations and the National Council of Churches in the USA are taking action.

London - Church groups and the headquarters of Amnesty International have taken several actions. As long ago as May 29, Amnesty International called for the release of the 16 prisoners of conscience "arrested for the non-violent exercise of their human rights". A spokesperson referred to the Internal Security Act as "a violation of the basic right to freedom from arbitrary arrest, to the presumption of innocence and to fair and prompt trial in accordance with international standards".

Geneva - On 2 June the International Commission of Jurists urged the Singapore government to bring to trial or release the 16 persons detained without charge or trial. It stated that the allegations of the Ministry of Home Affairs are of a very general nature and it can best be left to a court to decide on their veracity. The ICJ expressed its grave concern over the revived use of the Internal Security Act.

Europe - Other initiatives are being taken throughout Europe by church and human rights groups including approaches to the European Parliament and EEC. The International League of Human Rights in Paris has taken up the concern.

Asian Media - Extensive coverage in the Asian regional media (Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek) and major dailies (e.g. South China Morning Post, Hongkong) has exhibited widespread disbelief of the Singapore government's allegations.

Released by

EMERGENCY COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN SINGAPORE

P O Box 28-100, Christchurch, Aotearoa-New Zealand.