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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

OPINION | DECEMBER 19, 2008

China's Human-Rights Activists Need Support

The signatories of Charter 08 face the wrath of the state.

By VACLAV HAVEL

Prague

In January 1977, a group of Czechoslovak citizens, of which I was privileged to be one, released Charter 77. That document was our call for the better protection of basic civil and political rights by the state. It was also the articulation of our belief that, as citizens, we had a certain responsibility to work with the Czechoslovak government to ensure through our vigilance that basic rights would be protected.

With the release of Charter 77, we wanted to create not a membership organization, but instead, as I wrote then, "a free, informal open community of people of different convictions, different faiths, and different professions united by the will to strive, individually and collectively, for the respect of civic and human rights in our own country and throughout the world."

More than three decades later, in December 2008, a group of Chinese citizens has taken our modest effort as their model. They have made a similar call -- for human rights, good governance and respect for the responsibility of citizens to keep watch over their government -- to ensure that their state plays by the rules of a modern open society.

The document they have issued is an impressive one. In it, the authors of Charter 08 call for protection of basic rights, increased judicial independence, and legislative democracy. But they do not stop there. With the passage of time, we have come to realize that a free and open society means more than the protection of basic rights. To that end, the signatories of Charter 08 also wisely call for better environmental protection, a bridging of the rural-urban divide, better provision of social security, and a serious effort to reconcile with human-rights abuses committed in decades past.

The original signatories, who number more than 300, come from all walks of life, and from across China -- a testament to the broad appeal of the ideas put forward in Charter 08. Among the signatories are China's top minds from law, political science, economics, the arts and culture. Their decision to sign onto such a document was surely not taken lightly, and their words should not be so brusquely brushed aside. Since the Charter was released, more than 5,000 men

and women have added their names to it.

China in 2008 is not Czechoslovakia in 1977. In many ways, China today is freer and more open than my own country of 30 years ago. And yet, the response of the Chinese authorities to Charter 08 in many ways parallels the Czechoslovak government's response to Charter 77.

Rather than respond to our offer of engagement with dialogue and debate, the Czechoslovak government instead chose repression. It arrested some of the signatories, interrogated and harassed others, and spread disinformation about our movement and its aims.

So too has the Chinese government declined the invitation to discuss with the signatories of Charter 08 the merits of their proposal. Instead, it has detained two signatories, Liu Xiaobo and Zhang Zuhua, both of whom the government has identified as lead actors in its creation. Mr. Zhang has been released, but Mr. Liu, a prominent writer and intellectual, is still being held incommunicado without charge.

Dozens of others have been interrogated, and an unknowable number are being watched by state security agents as they make phone calls and type email messages on behalf of their jailed comrades. Soon after Charter 77 was issued, I was arrested for the commission of "serious crimes against the basic principles of the Republic." It is feared that Mr. Liu will be charged with "incitement to subvert state power," a similarly arbitrary crime.

I am saddened by this turn of events, and my thoughts are with Liu Xiaobo's wife, Liu Xia, who has yet to be given the opportunity to speak with her husband. The Chinese government should learn well the lesson of the Charter 77 movement: that intimidation, propaganda campaigns, and repression are no substitute for reasoned dialogue. Only the immediate and unconditional release of Liu Xiaobo will demonstrate that, for Beijing, that lesson has been learned.

Mr. Havel is the former president of the Czech Republic.

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