

Harper should confront Chinese premier over horrific abuses

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Not so long ago, China was an economically backward, reclusive nation. But in recent years, it has become an economic powerhouse, financier of U.S. government debt and one of the most important members of the G20, which meets in Toronto this week. Notwithstanding China's rapid economic advancement, Beijing has made little progress on human rights.

The Communist regime has singled out Falun Gong for especially harsh treatment. Former federal Liberal cabinet minister and human rights campaigner David Kilgour describes the spiritual movement as "an ancient discipline which encourages good ethical standards for cultivating body and character."

Falun Gong quickly gained adherents in China during the 1990s, attracting an estimated 100 million practitioners by 1999. Fearing that the growing popularity of the movement would undercut support for the Communist Party, Beijing set out to destroy Falun Gong.

"Torture, rapes, beatings to death, detention in forced labour camps, brainwashing all have become the daily lot of Falun Gong practitioners across China for more than a decade," Kilgour told a conference at the European Parliament last month.

According to Amnesty International, Falun Gong practitioners "face regular intimidation and persecution for their beliefs." Similarly, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that Chinese repression of peaceful religious groups such as Falun Gong is "intense and widespread."

More disturbing are horrific accounts of imprisoned Falun Gong practitioners being used as unwilling sources of organs for surgical transplants. The macabre allegation was laid out in a 2007 study by Kilgour and David Matas, a Canadian human rights lawyer.

The report concluded that Falun Gong prisoners of conscience were being murdered on operating tables and their "vital organs, including kidneys, livers, corneas and hearts were seized involuntarily, for sale at high prices, sometimes to foreigners."

Kilgour and Matas have followed up their study with a new book. Travelling to over a dozen countries to interview Falun Gong practitioners who had been imprisoned in China's system of 340 forced labour camps, the authors of *Bloody Harvest* conclude that there "has been and continues to be large-scale organ seizures from unwilling Falun Gong practitioners."

In recognition of their investigative work, Kilgour and Matas have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. They only agreed to it, explained Kilgour in an e-mail, because the Nobel nomination will draw the world's attention to the plight of Falun Gong practitioners.

Although China recently declared that harvesting organs from prisoners is improper, Kilgour believes that the plight of Falun Gong practitioners has worsened since he and Matas began investigating the issue, Kilgour told a McGill University audience in April, the number of prisoners executed in China has declined. Yet the number of transplants has remained at the same level, he said.

"Since the only other substantial source of organs for transplants in China besides Falun Gong practitioners is prisoners sentenced to death, a decrease of sourcing from prisoners sentenced to death means an increase of sourcing from Falun Gong practitioners," Kilgour concluded.

When the Harper Tories took office in 2006, Canada adopted a tougher approach to relations with China, eschewing the trade-based strategy of previous Liberal governments in favour of a foreign policy focused on the promotion of human rights. However, that principled approach has softened.

Human rights rhetoric has been replaced by the diplomatic language of commerce. For example, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon stated in an e-mail that Canada is "committed to a comprehensive relationship with China based on mutual respect, win-win cooperation and supported by high-level engagement." Citing co-

operation on a myriad of issues, including trade and energy, Cannon says that the world's most populace nation is "an important partner of Canada."

Does this mean that Prime Minister Stephen Harper will not talk about human rights when Chinese Premier Hu Jintao arrives in Ottawa for an official state visit in advance of the G20 summit? Not necessarily.

"Canada has serious concerns about the human rights situation in China," says Cannon's

spokesperson Catherine Loubier. She notes that the Canadian government has "raised concerns about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners with the Chinese authorities on many occasions and will continue to do so, both in Ottawa and in Beijing."

The Harper government appears to take allegations of organ harvesting seriously. "We've raised the issue with the Chinese government, urging them to ensure that all organ transplants take place in accordance with international standards of free and informed consent of the donor," Loubier says.

Meanwhile, Canadian companies and consumers should ask themselves if they want to continue to do business with a country that allegedly perpetrates such ghastly human rights abuses.

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