



Radio Free Asia

China Vows Clampdown on 'Illegal' Organ Transplant Trade

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August 19, 2014

China has vowed to crack down on the “illegal harvesting” of organs for transplants, although organs from executed prisoners will continue to be available, a top health official has said.

The ruling Chinese Communist Party is planning a monitoring system to oversee organ transplants with regular checks on hospitals and doctors, health ministry official Wang Yu told official media.

Investigators will be targeting “private” allocations of organs, or the illegal use of executed prisoners' organs without consent, Wang said.

Meanwhile, vice-minister for health and family planning Huang Jiefu warned of "severe punishment" for any hospital, doctor or judicial institution found to have privately obtained, allocated or transplanted executed prisoners' organs.

He said organs willingly donated by the executed prisoners should be included in the nationwide organ allocation system to keep them out of the flourishing black market.

According to official figures, some 300,000 patients experience the failure of a major organ annually in China, but only around 10,000 organ transplants are performed at the country's 169 transplant facilities.

However, a healthcare company vice-chairwoman, who gave only her surname Lin, said the number of transplants actually carried out is probably much higher.

"I personally asked a liver transplant specialist surgeon about this," said Lin, who recently returned from an international organ transplant conference. "He told me he had performed 100 procedures in just three months at his hospital, which wasn't even in a major city. If you extrapolate that to the 50-some transplant centers across the country, that adds up to 18,000 transplant operations carried out in the space of a year."

Vested interests

Xia Yeliang, a political science expert at the Cato Institute in Washington, said the recent move to ban private donations indicated how serious the trade in illegal organ transplants had become.

"A lot of media organizations have already reported some big cases, but the government has so far dismissed them as rumors," Xia told RFA. "The fact that they're bringing this up now means that they are admitting it's a problem, which is an improvement on the way things were before."

But Xia said the crackdown wouldn't be easy, given that powerful vested interests in the organ black market existed throughout the party's political and legal affairs law enforcement system, once headed by retired security czar Zhou Yongkang, who is currently under internal investigation for "serious breaches of discipline."

"If they can admit that the problem exists, then why can't they admit publicly that [jailed former Chongqing party chief] Bo Xilai and Zhou Yongkang were involved in the removal of organs from living prisoners?" Xia said.

"They probably only admitted it because [former president] Jiang Zemin is behind the scenes backing it up, tacitly or overtly," he said, calling on the government to release more details of illegal transplants.

"If the Communist Party really believes this is a problem, it owes the people an explanation," Xia said.

Lin said while a provision exists under Chinese law to protect the rights of prisoners and death row inmates, there are no guarantees at all in reality.

"China doesn't lack legislation, but implementation is non-existent," she said.

Prisoner transplants

Reports have implicated that Chinese hospitals and doctors practice forced organ harvesting from prisoners, including living practitioners of the Falun Gong movement, Uyghurs, Tibetans and House Christians.

Beijing admits it relies on executed inmates for organ transplants but strongly denies that it deliberately executes prisoners to harvest organs.

As of Aug. 14, volunteers registered with country's nationwide organ-donor scheme numbered just 2,107, the health ministry said.

Chinese state media have reported that two-thirds of transplant organs in the country come from prisoners.

However, the health ministry promised in March 2012 that it would abolish organ harvesting from death-row inmates by 2017.

