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22 April 2010

Thousands at risk of forced sterilization in China

Authorities in southern China must not violate human rights in carrying out their reported plans to sterilize thousands of people this month in a drive to meet family planning targets, Amnesty International said on Thursday.

According to Chinese media reports, officials in Puning City, Guangdong Province aim to sterilize 9,559 people, some against their will, by 26 April.

The authorities started the campaign to sterilize people who already have at least one child on 7 April.

Four days later, the authorities said they had already met 50 per cent of their target. A local doctor told the media his team was scheduled to work from 8am until 4am the following day.

"Forced sterilizations carried out by officials amount to torture and the haste of the procedures raises questions about their safety and possible health impacts," said Roseann Rife, Amnesty International's Asia-Pacific Deputy Director.

The Puning City authorities are also reported to have detained 1,377 relatives of couples targeted for sterilization in an apparent attempt to pressure them to consent to having the operation.

The authorities have defended their campaign, saying there are large numbers of migrant workers who are of childbearing age in the area and that some of the residents have misunderstood and hence not complied with the family planning regulations. The campaign is also said to include public education on family planning policy.

According to the Puning City government website, Puning has a population of 2.228 million.

China introduced a Population and Family Planning Law in September 2002, in an attempt to standardize family planning policies across the country and to safeguard individuals' rights. Coercion including detaining of family members in implementation of the policy is forbidden.

According to law and regulations, families in urban areas are allowed to have only one child although there are exceptions.

The policies for people living in rural areas are less restrictive and often implemented less rigorously. Enforcement also varies between localities. Rural couples are permitted to have more than one child, for example if their firstborn is a girl.

Local birth quotas, upheld by stiff penalties as well as rewards, play a prominent part in the policy. Reports of coerced abortions and sterilizations have continued and few officials are believed to have been brought to justice or punished for such abuses.

Children born outside the quota are not issued residency registration documents known as hukou. Without hukou, they have no access to health care, education or other social security provisions.

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