

For immediate release



Concern escalates over missing Chinese AIDS activist Dr. Wan Yan Hai slated for human rights award

NEW YORK AND MONTREAL, August 29, 2002 -- **Human Rights Watch and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network today expressed increasing concern about missing Chinese AIDS activist Wan Yanhai. Dr. Wan had planned to travel to Canada in September as the first recipient of a newly established human rights award. The award, to be presented by both organizations on September 13 in Montreal, recognizes “Dr. Wan’s courageous activism in combating a growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in China, and efforts to protect the rights of those affected or most at risk of HIV/AIDS.”**

“Dr. Wan has contributed enormously to breaking the conspiracy of silence around AIDS in China,” said Richard Elliott, Director, Policy and Research for the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “If he is in government custody, we urge his immediate release, and that he be allowed to travel to Canada to receive his award.”

Dr. Wan, thirty-eight, had been under heightened police surveillance and was last seen in Beijing on August 24. Friends and relatives have been unable to contact him, and police officials have not responded to requests for an investigation into his disappearance.

Since the mid-1990s, Dr. Wan has been coordinator of the AIZHI (AIDS) Action Project, a nongovernmental organization based in Beijing that provides some of the only basic information on HIV/AIDS available to people in China through a widely used Web site (www.aizhi.org). He has been instrumental in exposing a growing HIV/AIDS epidemic in China’s Henan Province, where as many as one million people may have been infected as a result of unsafe blood collection practices. In July 2002, Dr. Wan’s organization was evicted from its offices at a private university in Beijing after the university was pressured by the government to shut the organization down.

Dr. Wan was selected earlier this summer to be the first recipient of an “Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights,” a international award program established this year by the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch to recognize activists who have made exceptional contributions to protecting the rights and dignity of people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

“We recently assisted Dr. Wan in obtaining a visa from the Canadian Embassy in Beijing in order for him to attend the awards ceremony in Montreal, and his travel arrangements have been made,” said Elliott. “We have now contacted officials at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Ottawa, asking them to make further inquiries through their office in Beijing, and we are urging the Canadian government to raise concerns about Dr. Wan’s whereabouts and well-being with the Chinese government as soon as possible.”

“Many health experts fear that the AIDS epidemic in China is developing into one of the worst in the world,” said Mickey Spiegel, senior researcher in the Asia Division of Human Rights Watch. “It is only through the actions of people like Dr. Wan that there is any hope of dealing forthrightly with this public health and human

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rights disaster. Unfortunately, his courage in speaking out against human rights abuses in China has placed him at great personal risk.”

As a government official, Dr. Wan founded China's first AIDS hotline in 1992. A year later, he was fired from that post, as openness about HIV/AIDS and sexual minorities and their risk of contracting HIV was not welcomed by the authorities. With support from a variety of private and international sources, he has continued this work and become one of the most visible AIDS activists in the China.

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Additional information about Dr. Wan’s human rights work and about the *Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights*, is available online at <http://www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/awards.htm>.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is a national organization engaged in education, legal and ethical analysis, and policy development. Founded in 1992, the Network promotes responses to HIV/AIDS that respect human rights; facilitate prevention efforts and access to care, treatment and support; minimize the adverse impact of HIV/AIDS on individuals and communities; and address the social and economic factors that increase vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and to human rights abuses. The Network is an NGO in Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. Its work has received national and international recognition, and the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS has included the Network’s activities in UNAIDS’ collection of “best practices.”

About Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch is an independent, nongovernmental organization that conducts regular, systematic investigations of human rights abuses in some seventy countries around the world. Its reputation for timely, reliable disclosures has made it an essential source of information for those concerned with human rights. It defends freedom of thought and expression, due process and equal protection of the law, and a vigorous civil society. Human Rights Watch began in 1978, and today includes divisions covering Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East as well as three thematic divisions on arms, children's rights, and women's rights. The organization maintains offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Moscow, Tashkent, and Bangkok.