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On human rights, China enforces the sound of silence

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail

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The Chinese authorities appear to be worried at the prospect of an equivalent of the Arab spring; their actions against dissidents seemed to intensify after a mysterious call this winter for a jasmine revolution. The harshness may also represent some jockeying in advance of a transfer of power to a new generation of leaders in 2012 and 2013.

Hu Jia, 37, was released on Sunday after 42 months in prison, after testifying by phone to the European Parliament, protesting human-rights violations in the period leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. He won Europe's highest honour for human rights work, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, in 2008. When he was freed this week, dozens of police barred reporters from his home. His wife, Zeng Jinyan, had explained earlier in a blog that he would be deprived of his political rights for one year.

Ai Weiwei, 54, an artist, was released last week after being held since April without charges. Human Rights Watch says he has the "sword of Damocles" hanging over his head, and if he speaks out he will lose his freedom again, though no explicit restriction stops him. Some had thought that because of his international fame as an artist and as the son of a renowned poet, the state and the party wouldn't act against him. They thought wrong. Mr. Ai has asked reporters to leave him to his silence.

For the first time, China's public security budget has outstripped its military budget. Scores of human rights lawyers and bloggers have been rounded up and made to "disappear," at least temporarily, according to Chinese human-rights groups and Amnesty International. Censorship of the Internet is being strengthened.

Mr. Hu and Mr. Ai are not truly free, and as long as they are not, China cannot claim it is strengthening its rule of law. The West, while engaging with China, needs to continue sending the message that human rights matter.

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