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AFP: Amnesty appeals for Internet freedom in China

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BEIJING, Nov 26 (AFP) - Rights group *Amnesty International* urged China on Wednesday to release what it said was several dozen prisoners jailed for using the Internet purely to peacefully express views or share information.

At least 33 people had been detained or imprisoned for such actions, the London-based group said in a report on Internet freedom in China, adding that two of the prisoners had died after apparent torture or ill-treatment.

"Everyone detained purely for peacefully publishing their views or other information on the Internet or for accessing certain websites are prisoners of conscience," the group said in a statement.

"They should be released immediately and unconditionally."

The cases detailed in the report include political activists as well as those connected to organizations such as the illegally outlawed Falun Dafa meditation practice. Both the prisoners who died in custody were Falun Dafa practitioners, Amnesty said. Falun Dafa is a peaceful meditation practice that was outlawed by the Chinese government after the number of practitioners grew larger than the body of registered communist party members.

The rights group also highlighted the case of former policeman Li Dawei, who was jailed for 11 years in July for downloading "reactionary" material from the Internet, relatives and pressure groups said at the time.

All appeals by the 40-year-old from the northwestern province of Gansu had been turned down, Amnesty said. The group's appeal follows a notable clampdown over recent months on the use of the Internet in China, which has an online population rapidly approaching 50 million.

Restrictions have been tightened since a fire at an Internet cafe in Beijing killed 24 young people in June, with almost half the country's popular web cafes closed in the following months, according to state press.

At the same time authorities have ordered Internet cafes to install software which blocks access to a wide range of sites, while domestic content providers -- including the Chinese arm of web giant Yahoo -- have signed up to a sweeping self-censorship agreement.

"As the Internet industry continues to expand in China, the government continues to tighten controls on on-line information," the Amnesty statement said.

"These have included the filtering or blocking of some foreign websites, the creation of special Internet police, the blocking of search engines and actions to shut down websites which post information on corruption or articles critical of government."

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China hopes interest in the Internet will help spread technological know-how and boost economic growth in the longer run, but is deeply wary of the Internet's capability of spreading news and opinions in a society where the Communist Party has traditionally controlled all information.

Amnesty warned that as matters stand, the country's Internet users "are increasingly caught up in a tight web of rules restricting their fundamental human rights".

"Anyone surfing the Internet could potentially be at risk of arbitrary detention and imprisonment," it said, adding that under the law, those who publish information on the Internet considered to be a state secret could even be sentenced to death.