

China's High Court Calls for Legal Reforms

Welcome to As It Is, from VOA Learning English. I'm Mario Ritter in Washington. Today, we hear about a statement from China's top court about the country's legal system. Then, we hear why residents are leaving Hong Kong.

China's Top Court Calls for Legal Reforms

Recently, China's Supreme Court released a statement banning forced confessions. Some legal experts have welcomed the announcement. Christopher Cruise has more.

The highest court in China has ruled out forced confessions and has promised to reduce the number of unjust legal decisions. Some observers say the ruling is a sign of the court's desire to reform the country's legal system. The ruling Thursday by China's Supreme People's Court is meant to strengthen the rule of law in a system that many observers see as lacking judicial independence.

The court says all levels of the judiciary are required to follow the law. It says their judgments should be based on facts and protect human rights. Included in its list of 27 requirements is a defendants' right to a lawyer, the need for open trials based on legally gathered evidence, and a ban on confessions gained through torture.

Nicholas Bequelin of Human Rights Watch says the ruling is a positive sign that the government is listening to demands for the protection of rights during criminal trials.

"It gives a foothold to lawyers and legal reformers in China."

In recent years, China has passed several rules that guarantee defendants fair trials. One amendment approved last year requires police to permit lawyers to meet with their clients within 48 hours of making a request. Legal experts say Thursday's ruling is a step in that same direction, in a system damaged by wrongful convictions and mistreatment of lawyers.

Yet, rights activists say that even with court reforms in China, the power of the police still make the justice system unfair. In a recent case, a Chinese

under investigation for corruption was tortured to death and drowned in a bathtub as police investigators tried to force him to confess.

Mister Bequelin of Human Rights Watch says that because courts in China often obey police departments, there are limits to what the courts can do.

"It is all well for the courts to say 'oh we are [going to] make sure we reduce wrongful convictions and torture,' but the fact is they have very little leverage to do that because it is basically the police that is driving the criminal system in China."

The Supreme Court's statement comes after a meeting of Communist Party leaders. The reforms to the legal system were among a group of reforms announced after that meeting.

I'm Christopher Cruise.

More People Are Leaving Hong Kong

In 1997, many Hong Kong citizens left for the United States, Canada and Australia before Hong Kong again became a Chinese territory. They were fearful of the country's future under Communist rule. The flow of people slowed after China said it would respect Hong Kong's partial self-rule under China's "one country, two systems" policy. But now, social and political issues are causing more Hong Kong citizens to leave the former British colony. June Simms has more from Ivan Broadhead's report.

The China Post newspaper reports that the number of Hong Kong citizens seeking to live in Taiwan has increased six times in the last six months. It says there were nearly 700 requests in September.

Immigration expert Mary Chan is with Rothe International Canada. She says her office in Hong Kong has also received many requests from families seeking to move overseas.

Similar increases in requests took place during the 1998 Asian financial crisis, and again in 2003 with the outbreak of the infectious disease SARS. But Mary Chan says this time, the reasons are different.

"They are not so happy with the situation now in Hong Kong. The majority are concerned about the education for their kids...it's not easy to get them into a good school. Property prices [are] the second concern. For middle class families, prices are really unaffordable."

Almost 4,000 people moved away from Hong Kong in the first six months of 2013. That is an increase of eight percent from last year. The cost of living is one of the main reasons people are leaving. Lawmaker Fernando Cheung says it costs an average of \$1 million to buy a small apartment in central Hong Kong.

He also says there has been a decrease in the territory's political independence and growing dissatisfaction with the government.

"We are losing our autonomy, and people are thinking of moving away permanently."

Many Hong Kong residents blame immigrants from mainland China for the problems. Many of these visitors enter on visas given by the government in Beijing, not by the local government. In the last ten years, 500,000 visitors have settled in the city, which has a population of 7 million. Hong Kong residents call them "locusts." They say they are competing with natives for resources and putting pressure on services, like schools and hospitals.

For only the eighth time in the last 50 years, government figures confirm that more people are leaving Hong Kong than moving there. I'm June Simms.

On this day...

And in American History, 50 years ago today in 1963, Lyndon Johnson spoke to Congress. It was five days after he became president, following the murder of John F. Kennedy.

"No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest possible passage of the civil-rights bill for which he fought so long."

And that is our show for today. I'm Mario Ritter. Thank you for joining us! For the latest news, be listening to VOA at the top of the hour, Universal Time.