

The New York Times

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Debate Flares Over China's Inclusion at Vatican Organ Trafficking Meeting

By **Didi Kirsten Tatlow**

Feb. 7, 2017

BEIJING — A politely worded but testy debate has flared over a Vatican conference on human organ trafficking, with a group of ethicists warning that China will use the participation of its most senior transplant official to convince the world that it has overhauled its organ procurement system.

In a letter to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in Rome, where the two-day Summit on Organ Trafficking and Transplant Tourism began on Tuesday, 11 ethicists wrote: “Our concern is with the harvesting and trafficking of organs from executed prisoners in China.”

China has admitted that it extracted organs from death row prisoners for decades, in what critics have called a serious violation of the rights of inmates who cannot give genuine consent. Since Jan. 1, 2015, Chinese officials have said they no longer use prisoners' organs, though doubts persist.

“We urge the summit to consider the plight of incarcerated prisoners in China who are treated as expendable human organ banks,” wrote the 11 signatories, who included Wendy Rogers of Macquarie University in Australia; Arthur Caplan of the New York University Langone Medical Center; David Matas and David Kilgour, both Canadian human rights lawyers; and Enver Tohti, a former surgeon from the western Chinese region of Xinjiang.

The Chinese official attending the meeting, Dr. Huang Jiefu, a liver transplant specialist, is co-chairman of the National Organ Donation and Transplantation Committee of China, which is charged with remaking the country's organ donation system to ensure transparency in sourcing and distributing organs in line with international standards.

Reached in Rome, Dr. Huang did not comment immediately, writing in a WeChat message that he was at the meeting and would reply soon.

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An article co-written by another member of the national committee, Dr. Zheng Shusen, also a liver transplant specialist, was recently withdrawn after publication by the journal *Liver International* over concerns it relied on data from executed prisoners, *Science* magazine reported on Monday.

In their letter, the ethicists also argued that there was no evidence that China had ended the practice of taking organs from executed prisoners, which they said included prisoners of conscience.

“On the contrary, there is evidence that it continues,” they wrote. “Officials from China should not be given the prestigious platform of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences to spread misinformation about reform in China.”

In a response to the letter, addressed to Dr. Rogers, who is also chairwoman of the advisory committee of the International Coalition to End Organ Pillaging in China, Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Science, warned against promoting political agendas.

“The organizer intends for the summit to be an academic exercise and not a reprise of contentious political assertions,” Bishop Sorondo wrote.

In an interview, Dr. Rogers said she disagreed with the bishop's response. “I thought that was outrageous, really, to try and hedge off any discussion by saying it's political,” she said. “The weight of evidence is such that it's up to the Chinese to prove that they're not doing this, and not the other way round.”

Last year, 4,080 Chinese donated a total of 11,296 organs, according to an article published on Monday in the Chinese journal *Health News* and republished in *People's Daily*, the Communist Party's main newspaper. That number is a small fraction of the total needed. Health officials estimate that each year about 300,000 people in China need a transplant.

To help change the system, officials have issued public appeals and deployed organ donation coordinators at hospitals. But many Chinese are unwilling, fearing that it is unfilial to one's ancestors be buried with organs missing.

The meeting in Rome comes amid warming ties between China and the Vatican. Pope Francis is eager to visit China, home to millions of Catholics who are members of either the state-sponsored church or the underground church that is loyal to Rome. Some consider themselves members of both.

The Chinese state does not recognize the jurisdiction of Rome over Chinese Catholics, though Catholicism is one of China's five official religions along with Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism. Organizers of the Vatican meeting said they hoped it would help generate remedies to the problem of organ trafficking and transplant tourism, which they called a “form of human slavery” afflicting many parts of the world.

“We hope this summit will create a top-down and bottom-up movement in society, to raise awareness of the extension and seriousness of this modern challenge and lay the groundwork for moral and appropriate solutions based on human dignity, freedom, justice and peace,” the academy’s website said.

In a Twitter post last year, Pope Francis made clear his objections to organ trafficking:

The Vatican knows about the problem surrounding organ sourcing in China and wants to help change it, said Francesco Sisci, a specialist in Catholic affairs at Renmin University of China who interviewed the pope last year.

“They are well aware of the situation,” Mr. Sisci said in an email. “But the Vatican can only do this: encourage better behavior. It can’t start a trade war or send in the Swiss Guards as paratroopers,” he added, referring to the small force responsible for the pope’s safety.

Condemning the perpetrators “may be good revenge, but that’s the job of the Nuremberg trials, or of God,” Mr. Sisci said. “The church has a different job: to try to improve the world, in this case China. To understand what it is, not what we would like it to be.”

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