

China to ease one-child policy, abolish labor camps, report says

By Mariano Castillo , CNN

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(CNN) -- After months of hints, China announced Friday it will relax its decades-long one-child policy and abolish labor camps in an effort to improve human rights, the state-run Xinhua news agency reported.

Officials had said earlier both controversial policies were under review, but that did not diminish the force of Friday's announcement.

China announced it will relax its decades-long controversial one-child policy.

The biggest change could be the abolishment of the so-called "re-education through labor" system under which tens of thousands are imprisoned in China without trial.

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"Reform through labor" was set up in the 1950s under Mao Zedong and modeled on Soviet gulags -- a place where "counterrevolutionaries" and "class enemies" could be detained without trial.

Millions are believed to have died through overwork, suicide and harsh conditions until a system overhaul in the 1970s when Deng Xiaoping released prisoners accused of political and religious offenses.

According to the latest available figures from the Ministry of Justice, 160,000 people were held in 350 re-education through labor centers nationwide at the end of 2008. The United Nations has said the figure is possibly as high as 190,000 people.

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As part of the reforms, China said it will reduce the number of crimes subject to the death penalty.

Even those who know little about China have likely heard about its one-child policy. China's family planning laws require most families living in urban areas to have one child.

The policy will be slightly relaxed so that couples will be allowed to have two children if one of the parents was an only child, Xinhua reported. Currently, both parents must be sole children to be eligible for a second child.

The one-child policy, though applauded by many for slowing down China's population growth, has been widely criticized for resulting in forced abortions and hefty fines that are sometimes used to enforce it.

Some critics say the law hurts China's elderly, who typically rely on their children for support in old age, and even constrains economic growth as the working age population begins to decline.

CNN's David McKenzie, Peter Shadbolt, Katie Hunt and Feng Ke contributed to this report.

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