

Chinese minister vents anger when Canadian reporter asks about human rights

Wang Yi tells journalist 'your question is full of prejudice ... and arrogance' after she asks about Hong Kong booksellers and detained Canadian Kevin Garrat

Ashifa Kassam in Toronto and Tom Phillips in Beijing

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China's foreign minister berated a journalist during a visit to Canada on Wednesday for asking an "irresponsible" question about China's human rights record.

Wang Yi was in Ottawa to meet prime minister Justin Trudeau and Stéphane Dion, the minister of foreign affairs. At a joint news conference offered by Wang and Dion, Canadian journalists were limited to one question and a follow-up for both ministers.

Reporter Amanda Connolly of online news site IPolitics directed a question to Dion that touched on the case of Canadian Kevin Garratt, detained since 2014 in China on charges of espionage and stealing state secrets.

Connolly said: "There are no shortages of concerns about China's treatment of human rights advocates such as the Hong Kong booksellers and its detention of the Garratts, not to mention the destabilising effects of its territorial ambitions in the South China Sea."

She followed up with another question, which had been agreed upon by several news media. "Given these concerns, why is Canada pursuing closer ties with China, how do you plan to use that relationship to improve human rights and security in the region, and did you specifically raise the case of the Garratts during your talks?"

Dion said he had addressed the case with Wang and that the two had had an "honest and frank" conversation on human rights and consular affairs. "We expect that we will not always see eye-to-eye with each other, but we need to make progress," said Dion.

Wang later weighed in with his own response, telling the reporter, "I have to say that your question is full of prejudice against China and arrogance ... I don't know where that comes from. This is totally unacceptable," he said through an interpreter.

He continued, visibly angry. "Other people don't know better than the Chinese people about the human rights condition in China and it is the Chinese people who are in the best situation, in the best position to have a say about China's human rights situation."

Wang asked the journalist if she had ever been to China. "Do you know that China has lifted more than 600 million people out of poverty? ... And do you know China has written protection and promotion of human rights into our constitution?"

Canada's foreign minister stood by quietly as he continued. "So I would like to suggest to you please don't ask questions in such an irresponsible manner and though we welcome goodwill suggestions, we reject groundless or unwarranted accusations," he said.

China is currently witnessing a period of political tightening that human rights activists and observers say is the most severe since the days following the 1989 crackdown on Tiananmen protesters.

Since President Xi Jinping took power in late 2012, security forces have harassed, threatened and imprisoned scores of government critics including bloggers, journalists, lawyers, feminist campaigners and scholars.

In January, a Swedish human rights activist was taken into secret detention and then paraded on television after being accused of being a foreign agent attempting to undermine the Communist party.

More than 20 people remain in detention following an unprecedented crackdown on human rights lawyers that began in July 2015.

Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, said Wang's rebuke suggested Beijing believed it could control foreign journalists just as it does Chinese journalists at home.

"Senior Chinese officials are accustomed to not having to face tough questions from the press at home, given the state's chokehold on the media," she said. "But instead of being better equipped to answer ordinary questions like these when travelling abroad, officials like foreign minister Wang seem to think they can impose those same constraints on journalists abroad - and on that subject they are sorely mistaken."

Richardson said Wang was also wrong to claim only Chinese people were equipped to discuss the country's human rights situation. "If that's true, why is his government imprisoning rather than engaging people like [jailed Nobel laureate] Liu Xiaobo and so many others from China who have similar questions?"

Wang's verbal attack on the journalist and Canada's failure to speak out against it sparked online criticism.

"And Mr Dion just stands there??" tweeted Tony Clement, a Conservative party of Canada MP.

The case of Garratt has strained relations between Ottawa and Beijing. Garratt and his wife Julia were detained in 2014 near the country's border with North Korea, where the pair ran a Christian coffee house.

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