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July 26, 2002

Dear Yvonne Coenders,

Thank you for sending me the translation of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs report on Chinese orphanages. I have read this document carefully and would like to make the following comments on it.

It is hard for me to assess the factual quality of this report, since it is based mainly on Dutch embassy visits to a few individual orphanages. However, to my mind there is little sign in the report that the Dutch officials have made any serious and sustained attempt to really investigate the accuracy (or otherwise) of the very serious charges of institutional abuse that Human Rights Watch made in its 1996 report "Death by Default: A policy of Fatal Neglect in China's State Orphanages" – charges that many other observers have also made over the years.

I have no doubt that the Dutch officials have reported accurately on what they actually saw in the orphanages they visited. But it would surely be naive of them to believe that what they personally witnessed was, necessarily, in any way representative of what goes on inside these institutions for the other 364 days of the year, when no "foreign dignitaries" are present there. As I'm sure they are well aware, Chinese officials are very proficient at staging "model visits" for the benefit of foreign guests. The Chinese government has been very well-sensitized to the international concern about conditions in Chinese orphanages since "Death by Default" first appeared, and therefore no one could seriously expect that it would allow foreign diplomatic visitors into a few selected institutions without first taking steps to ensure that everything in these institutions looked basically quite acceptable.

The real issue – which the Dutch ministry report fails even to mention-- is that the overwhelming majority of Chinese orphanages and other places where homeless infants and children are kept are still, to this day, barred to all foreign visitors or to any form of outside monitoring and scrutiny. Common sense alone tells us that there must be a very good reason why the Chinese authorities continue to refuse outside observers any access whatsoever to the vast majority of the country's more than 1,000 institutions for homeless infants and children. Until it does permit such access, we are entitled to assume that the horrific conditions in many of these institutions that were so thoroughly documented in "Death by Default" have continued basically unchanged. Indeed, I believe that this is the only safe and justifiable assumption for

foreign governments to take on this vitally important question at the present time.

Rather than writing a report based on a series of oneoff, brief visits to a few selected institutions, therefore, it would have been considerably more frank and useful of the Dutch diplomats to state clearly, at the outset that they have absolutely no idea of the conditions currently obtaining in the vast majority of Chinese orphanages and other institutions for homeless children. Moreover, I believe they should have qualified their remarks on what they actually observed during these few visits by pointing out that, at the very least, they recognize that the particular institutions they visited were most likely "spruced up" or "sanitized" well in advance of the visits. One can only regard their failure to note any of these points in their report as showing a worrying lack of investigative rigour on their part.

Extensive and meticulous descriptions of the physical interiors and general facilities of the places they visited (e.g. references to sports grounds, numbers of staff and inmates, etc) are no substitute for this kind of vitally necessary investigative effort, and if such an effort was in practice entirely beyond the abilities and resources of the Dutch embassy officials, then they should have acknowledged this fact openly and frankly-- rather than simply avoiding the real questions altogether, as I feel they have chosen to do in this report.

Finally, I must confess that I found certain passages in the Dutch ministry report to be simply baffling. The sentence, "Orphan care centre quality in China is not of a universally high standard," for example, is euphemistic to the point of being ridiculous. And the passage, "[I]n the past only the physical well being of the children was important" is frankly outrageous. As numerous Chinese government statistics cited in "Death by Default" made perfectly clear, the deaths-to-admissions ratio among inmates of many Chinese orphanages in the late 1980s and early 1990s ranged from between 50 percent to as high as 100 percent. These figures were not invented by "hostile" human rights groups; they were published officially by China's own Ministry of Civil Affairs.

The fact that the Chinese government ceased to publish any further annual statistics on mortality rates within Chinese orphanages after Human Rights Watch made those figures available to an international audience in 1996 provides, surely, further serious grounds for fearing the worst as regards the conditions obtaining in many Chinese orphanages since that time.

Yours sincerely,

Robin Munro