

Canadian campaigner warns of illegal organ harvesting

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Israelis who visit China for organ transplants should not turn a blind eye to the widespread illegal organ harvesting there, former Canadian cabinet minister David Kilgour said Wednesday.

Kilgour, coauthor of a report titled "An Independent Investigation into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China," spoke to the Knesset's Health and Welfare Committee.

"There are a number of measures that can be taken to stop Israelis from obtaining organs that are harvested in China from unwilling people," Kilgour told *The Jerusalem Post*. "The [Knesset] members showed that they were very familiar with the issue and were interested in hearing what could be changed."

Ahead of the Olympics in Beijing in August, China has taken renewed interest in its image abroad.

"It is a unique time to draw attention to human rights issues in China," said Kilgour, who has visited more than 40 countries to highlight the issue of organ harvesting ahead of the this summer's Olympic Games.

Three months ago, Chinese officials announced that the country was cracking down on medical tourists who visit the country for procedures that are markedly cheaper than in their home countries.

"It remains to be seen whether this is something which just lasts until the 2008 Olympics are over. Either way, it does not stop the organ harvesting, it just stops foreigners from getting them," Kilgour said.

According to "An Independent Investigation into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China," which was published in 2006 by Kilgour and David Matas, the Chinese government "systematically harvests" the organs of Falun Gong members, who follow a system of mind/body cultivation derived from qijong practice, and often compared to Buddhism and Taosim. In 1999, the Chinese government banned Falun Gong and began cracking down on the group.

Tens of thousands of followers of Falun Gong have been imprisoned, and are routinely killed for their organs, said Kilgour.

"Falun Gong practitioners in jail are tested every three months for blood and general health, and their information is put into a computer bank that identifies them. So when someone comes from Tel Aviv to China and checks into a hospital it is set up like some type of terrible restaurant. The computer does the choosing, but the lobster is the human being, the Falun Gong, who has been jailed and can now have now choice over their fate," said Kilgour.

Health insurance companies say thousands of Israelis go abroad each year for organ transplants. Israel has one of the lowest organ donor rates in the world, at fewer than 10 donors per million people, compared to Europe or the United States, where there are 15-30 donors per million people. China has become one of the top destinations for those in need of organs.

While Israeli health insurance companies officially condemn illegal organ harvesting, many end up funding their patients' trips to China.

The Chinese government denies any mistreatment of Falun Gong practitioners. Their embassy in Israel could not be reached for comment.



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