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China: Amnesty International fears for missing hunger-strike activists

Several Chinese activists who have supported or participated in a series of protest hunger-strikes since 4 February have been arrested or gone missing. Amnesty International calls on the authorities to clarify their exact whereabouts, guarantee their safety and free them unless they are charged with a recognisably criminal offence.

"Many of these activists are defending human rights," said Mark Allison, East Asia researcher at Amnesty International. "The authorities must ensure that they are able to continue with their peaceful activities without fear of arbitrary detention, harassment or other human rights violations."

The relay hunger-strike protest was started by prominent defence lawyer Gao Zhisheng, who wished to draw attention to recent beatings and detentions of human rights activists and lawyers who sought to defend them. Gao began by fasting for 48 hours and was quickly joined by others wishing to show their solidarity, who took turns in fasting. Some sources have suggested that the hunger strikers aim to carry on their protest until the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, by having a series of individuals and groups participating in turn.

Several participants or supporters have reportedly been detained or gone missing. They include:

Wen Haibo and Ma Wendu, assistants to Gao Zhisheng, who were reportedly detained on 16 February and interrogated for 48 and 20 hours respectively before being placed under tight police surveillance in their homes. Another assistant, Ouyang Xiaorong, a computer software programmer, was reportedly detained at the same time. He had just arrived in Beijing to help Gao Zhisheng. His current whereabouts remain unknown.

Qi Zhiyong, a pro-democracy activist, who lost a leg as a result of the bloody crackdown on the 1989 pro-democracy movement in Beijing. He went missing at around 11pm on 15 February 2005. Unconfirmed reports suggest that he has been detained by Beijing state security police, but his current whereabouts are unknown.

Prominent HIV/AIDS activist Hu Jia, who was reportedly taken away from his home by police on the morning of 16 February. It is unclear where he is being held.

Mao Hengfeng, a Shanghai-based activist, who was detained by police on 13 February. The police later told her husband that she is being detained under 'residential surveillance' for 'causing a

disturbance in a public place', but reportedly refused to disclose where she was being detained.

Ma Yalian, who was detained on 15 February by eight police officers at a friend's house in the Minxin district of Shanghai. Ma had been under tight surveillance since being released from ten days' police detention earlier this month. Ma Yalian had previously served a sentence of 18 months 'Re-education through Labour' for posting articles on the Internet criticising China's inefficient petitioning system.

"These detentions and other abuses seriously undermine claims by the authorities to 'respect and protect human rights', a new provision introduced into the Chinese Constitution in March 2004," said Mark Allison.

Gao Zhisheng was prompted to start the hunger strike by several recent abuses, including the recent beating of Yang Maodong (also known as Guo Feixiong), an activist and legal advisor who had been assisting residents of Taishi village in Guangdong province to unseat their allegedly corrupt village leader. Yang Maodong took part in the hunger strike in Beijing on 8 February, but was quickly detained by the police. He is currently under 'residential surveillance' at his home in Guangdong.

The protest has been supported by activists from various parts of China. Some supporters in other countries have also reportedly begun hunger-strike protests in a show of solidarity.

Gao Zhisheng has faced abuses himself since publicly calling on the authorities to stop what he called the 'barbaric' persecution of the Falun Gong spiritual movement in October 2005. Since then, he has been subjected to periods of detention, threats and surveillance by the police; his law licence has been revoked and he narrowly escaped serious injury or death in a car accident on 17 January 2005, which he claimed was instigated by the authorities. His house remains under police surveillance and his home telephone and fax have reportedly been cut off.

Other supporters of the protest include:

Zhao Xin, who heads the Beijing-based Empowerment and Rights Institute. He was beaten by unidentified men in November last year, apparently in an attempt to stop him continuing with his human rights activities.

Jiang Meili, the wife of Zheng Enchong, a lawyer who is currently imprisoned for 'state secrets' offences. She took part in the hunger-strike for 24 hours on 11 February. She was detained by Shanghai police for 19 hours when she tried to travel to Beijing later the same day, ostensibly to appeal to the authorities to allow Zheng Enchong to receive family visits. Before his arrest, Zheng Enchong had assisted many Shanghai residents who had been evicted from their homes apparently without adequate compensation.

Chen Guangcheng, a blind, self-educated legal advisor, who has been held in his home under 'residential surveillance' since September 2005 after he attempted to sue the local authorities in Linyi city, Shandong province, for carrying out an illegal policy of forced abortions and sterilizations on many local women last year. His wife, Yang Weijing, was beaten by a group of unknown assailants on 15 February, reportedly in view of a local party official who refused to intervene to stop the attack. The local authorities have reportedly denied her permission to visit a hospital to assess the state of her injuries.

For more information, please contact Amnesty International's press office in London on +44 207 413 5566 or Mark Allison in Hong Kong on +852 9267 2116.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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