

URGENT ACTION

COVID-19 JOURNALIST SENTENCED TO 4 YEARS FOR EXPOSING TRUTH

The Pudong New District People's Court sentenced citizen journalist Zhang Zhan to four years in prison on 28 December 2020. The charge against her of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" stemmed from her COVID-19 reports from Wuhan that began in February 2020. Zhang Zhan has suspended her hunger strike to avoid having her legs shackled and her hands restrained by detention centre authorities. However, there remains grave fear that she might face further torture and other ill-treatment.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping

Zhongnanhai
Xichang'anjie
Xichengqu, Beijing Shi 100017
People's Republic of China
Fax: +86 10 6238 1025
Email: english@mail.gov.cn

Dear President Xi:

I am writing to express grave concern about citizen journalist **Zhang Zhan (张展)**, who was sentenced to four years' imprisonment by the Pudong New District People's Court on 28 December 2020 for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事罪). Zhang Zhan has been arbitrarily detained since May 2020 and has now been found guilty simply for exercising her rights to freedom of opinion and expression, as enshrined in Article 19 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Given the fact that she was previously subject to torture and other ill-treatment, there is grave fear that she might face further torture and other ill-treatment.

Zhang Zhan travelled to Wuhan in February 2020 to report on the COVID-19 outbreak there. She reported detention of independent reporters, as well as the harassment of victims' family members. After her detention, she chose to carry out a hunger strike to protest her detention and assert her innocence. As a result, the detention centre authorities reportedly force-fed her against her will and made her wear leg shackles and hand restraints 24 hours a day for more than three months.

Instead of respecting Zhang Zhan's right to express her opinion and her choice to be on hunger strike, the detention centre authorities punished her in a manner that violated the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, going against China's obligations under international human rights law.

Zhang Zhan is a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression when she reported about COVID-19. Although Zhang Zhan resumed eating on 28 December to avoid further punishment, I remain extremely concerned about her health and well-being, as well as the risk that she might again be subjected to torture and other ill-treatment while in detention.

I therefore call on you to:

- **Release Zhang Zhan immediately and unconditionally, unless there is sufficient, credible and admissible evidence that she has committed an internationally recognized offence;**
- **Pending her release, ensure that Zhang Zhan has regular, unrestricted access to her family and lawyers of her choice and is not subjected further to torture or other ill-treatment; and**
- **Respect Zhang Zhan's right to health, autonomy and expression, and ensure that she has prompt and regular access to medical attention and adequate health care.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Zhang Zhan, a former lawyer, is a citizen journalist who has actively spoken out about politics and human rights issues in China. In February 2020, Zhang Zhan travelled to Wuhan, then the centre of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. She used online platforms (including WeChat, Twitter and YouTube) to report on the detention of other independent reporters as well as the harassment of victims' families.

On 18 December 2020, Zhang's defence lawyer received notification from Pudong New District People's Court that her trial would take place on 28 December. On the day of the trial, Zhang Zhan was brought to the courtroom in a wheelchair. Zhang's health has been a concern, as she has been forcibly fed by the authorities since she began a hunger strike in June 2020.

During the trial, prosecutors accused Zhang of using social media platforms to disseminate large volumes of false information. According to Zhang's defence lawyer, the prosecutor failed to present specific examples of false information in any of her social media posts.

Zhang Zhan started a hunger strike in June 2020 to protest her detention and assert her innocence. Despite her intention to continue with her protest, detention centre authorities reportedly began forcibly feeding her through a feeding tube, and it is reported that her cellmates were also involved in the act of forcibly feeding her. Zhang's defence lawyer said she is physically very weak and suffering from stomach pain, dizziness and weakness while walking. It is also reported that Zhang Zhan was forced to wear shackles and that her hands were restrained 24 hours a day for more than three months as punishment for her hunger strike. To avoid being forced to wear shackles and having her hands bound by detention authorities, Zhang resumed eating on 28 December 2020.

Citizen journalists were the primary, if not only, source of uncensored and first-hand information about the COVID-19 outbreak in China. There are not many citizen journalists as they are not able to obtain official accreditation to report news. Citizen journalists in China face consistent harassment and repression for reporting news and disseminating information that is censored by the government.

There have been many reports of independent journalists and activists harassed by authorities for sharing information about COVID-19 on social media. These include outspoken lawyer and citizen journalist Chen Qiushi, who reported being harassed by the authorities after posting footage from hospitals in Wuhan, and Wuhan resident Fang Bin, who was briefly taken away by the authorities after posting a video purporting to show corpses of COVID-19 victims.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, numerous articles relating to the virus have been censored, including those by mainstream media organizations such as *Caijing* (财经) and a subsidiary of *Beijing Youth Daily* (北京青年报). Certain social media posts, sensitive hashtags and demands for freedom of expression have all been quickly deleted or censored.

The crime of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事罪) under Article 293 of the Chinese Criminal Law is a broadly defined and vaguely worded offence that has been widely used to target activists and human rights defenders. Although the crime originally applied to acts that disrupted order in public places, the scope has expanded since 2013 to include online space as well. Anyone convicted could face a maximum of five years in prison.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English or Chinese

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 22 February 2021

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Zhang Zhan (she/her)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/3447/2020/en/>