

AI Index: PRE 01/239/2011
05 May 2011

Chinese government critics missing as crackdown on dissent widens

Authorities in China must clarify the current status and reveal the whereabouts of a lawyer and a journalist who have gone missing in the past week, Amnesty International said today as a clampdown on activists appeared to be widening.

Li Xiongbing, a prominent Beijing human rights lawyer known for taking on politically sensitive cases, has been missing since yesterday after he was telephoned by police.

Zhang Jialong, 23, a former *Caijing* magazine journalist who has covered the detention of acclaimed artist Ai Weiwei, went missing on 28 April after reportedly being approached by a person claiming to represent Beijing police.

“The sudden disappearance of these activists is alarming; the authorities must immediately provide clarification as to Li Xiongbing and Zhang Jialong’s whereabouts. If they have been detained for their legitimate human rights work, they must be released,” said Sam Zarifi, Amnesty International’s Asia-Pacific Director.

“This is part of a wider trend of repression of lawyers, writers and government critics; the authorities are trying to intimidate and silence anyone who writes about sensitive subjects or who dares to defend victims of human rights violations,” he added.

The families of Li Xiongbing and Zhang Jialong have received no formal notification from the authorities about their detention or whereabouts.

Li Xiongbing’s wife, Wu Haiying, says she last heard from him on Wednesday afternoon, when he called to say he would be away for some days. Wu Haiying has since been unable to reach her husband by telephone.

Zhang Jialong has also reported on the aftermath of the Sanlu tainted milk scandal according to the International Federation of Journalists. Six children died and 300,000 became ill from drinking infant formula tainted with melamine in 2008.

Li Xiongbing has represented Gongmeng, a legal aid organization, and Aizhixing, an AIDS NGO, which has faced bureaucratic restrictions and police warnings. Its director Wan Yanhai went into exile in 2010 to escape government persecution.

Since online calls for a Chinese ‘Jasmine Revolution’ inspired by people’s movements in the Middle East and North Africa began circulating in late February, the Chinese authorities have rounded up dozens of activists, lawyers and bloggers.

Human rights lawyer Li Fangping returned home Wednesday after disappearing for five days. He has declined to talk about the events of the past week.

Writer and human rights activist Ding Fangguan (known as Gu Chuan) and lawyers Jiang Tianyong and Teng Biao were released last month but remain under illegal house arrest.

Ding Fangguan has not yet been able or willing to describe in detail how he was treated during the 62 days he was held in incommunicado detention.

“The attacks on lawyers in particular signal a big step back from the Chinese government’s commitment to the rule of law and the development of the legal profession,” Sam Zarifi said.

Among the more than 200,000 lawyers in China, only a small proportion is willing to take the risk of representing victims of human rights violations. These lawyers constitute an important part of the weiquan (‘rights defense’) movement, which uses Chinese law to protect the rights of individuals.

Like other human rights defenders in China, weiquan lawyers have been harassed, assaulted, kept under surveillance and prosecuted for protecting the rights of others.

The Chinese authorities have also imposed arbitrary administrative sanctions, such as fines, on law firms that employ weiquan lawyers.