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China: Human Rights Lawyer in Arbitrary Detention - Government Should Confirm Gao Zhisheng is Not Being Tortured or Ill-Treated

(New York and London, February 2, 2009)—The Chinese government should immediately disclose the whereabouts of Gao Zhisheng, a leading human rights lawyer who disappeared two weeks ago, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Human Rights in China said today in a joint statement. The three organizations stressed that Gao was at immediate risk of severe torture and ill-treatment by the Chinese security services and called for his immediate release.

"We are intensely fearful for Gao Zhisheng's safety at this time, given the security authorities' long history of abusing him and his family," said Sophie Richardson, Asia advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "He has given detailed accounts of how he was tortured in police custody in the past and he may well be suffering more of the same right now."

Lawyer Gao, who had been under constant police surveillance, along with his family, since receiving a suspended sentence for "inciting subversion" in 2006, was last heard from on January 19. According to reliable sources, he was subsequently detained by security forces and is being held at an unknown location.

"On February 9, the Chinese government will undergo a comprehensive review of its human rights record at the UN Human Rights Council," said Sharon Hom, executive director of Human Rights in China. "Coming close on the heels of the scathing review by the Committee Against Torture in November 2008, arbitrarily detaining and torturing a leading rights advocate is no way to show human rights progress."

In September 2007, Gao was detained for several weeks shortly after sending an open letter to the US Congress denouncing the human rights situation in China and describing his and his family's treatment at the hands of the security forces.

Gao detailed his illegal detention in 2007 and severe and sustained torture at the hands of security agents – including violent beatings, repeated electric shocks to his genitals, and having lit cigarettes held close to his eyes over a prolonged period, which left him partially blind for days afterwards. After he was released, acquaintances described him as seeming to be "a broken man," both physically and spiritually.

"China should immediately release Gao Zhisheng," said Roseann Rife, Asia-Pacific Deputy Director at Amnesty International. "China should demonstrate that it takes its international obligations seriously, in this case specifically the obligations under the convention against torture, which the Chinese government voluntarily took on in 1988."

In November 2008, the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) reported in its "Concluding Observations" on China that it remains "deeply concerned about the continued allegations, corroborated by

numerous Chinese legal sources, of routine and widespread use of torture and ill-treatment of suspects in police custody.”

Amnesty International, Human Rights in China and Human Rights Watch strongly urged concerned governments and intergovernmental bodies to call on the Chinese government to take all necessary steps to ensure Gao Zhisheng's safety and well being while in police custody and to release him at the earliest possible date.

Voted in 2001 as "one of China's top ten lawyers" by a publication run by the PRC Ministry of Justice, Gao is a self-trained legal professional with a history of representing the victims of some of the most egregious and politically controversial cases of human rights abuses by the police and other government agencies. In October 2005, he wrote a series of three letters to President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao calling on them to halt the continuing torture and ill-treatment of detained Falun Gong practitioners and the ongoing persecution of underground Christians and democracy activists.

After his 2007 detention, Gao expressed fears that he would be tortured again if he was rearrested.

In June 2007 Gao received the Courageous Advocacy Award of the American Board of Trial Advocates (ABOTA). His memoirs, *A China More Just*, were published in English the same year.