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Detained Chinese activist Wang Lihong goes on trial

A Chinese activist detained for organizing a demonstration in support of bloggers must be released, Amnesty International said as her trial took place today in Beijing.

Wang Lihong, 56, was arrested in March on charges of "assembling a crowd to block traffic" amid a government crackdown on dissent following protests in the Middle East and North Africa. In the court, she pleaded not guilty.

"Wang Lihong is one of many Chinese activists locked up in recent months on spurious charges, simply for exercising their right to peaceful freedom of expression," said Catherine Baber, Asia-Pacific Deputy Director at Amnesty International.

"Her trial is a farce and she should be released immediately."

Wang Lihong was taken from her home by nine police officers on 21 March 2011.

The charges relate to her participation in a peaceful protest in April 2010 in support of three internet activists from Fujian province who were charged with defamation for posting questions online about an alleged police cover-up in the death of a young woman.

If convicted of "assembling a crowd to block traffic or undermine traffic order", Wang Lihong could face up to five years in prison. The court verdict is expected within a month.

Wang Lihong's lawyers say they had limited access to her case documents, in violation of legal provisions on lawyers' rights, and that during the trial - which only lasted a few hours - they were not given enough time to present a proper defence.

Wang Lihong suffers from chronic back pain and her health has deteriorated after several months in detention.

Many activists in China have been campaigning for Wang Lihong's release and they gathered outside the court room in Beijing today.

"The Chinese authorities must ensure Wang Lihong has access to the legal representation of her choice, and that she is not tortured or ill-treated in custody," said Catherine Baber.

Wang Lihong is a widely known human rights activist who often provides food and clothes for those living on the street waiting to seek justice.

She frequently moves in with activists under police surveillance to provide emotional support. She has visited the wives of detained activists to help them with cooking and child care, and often has helped

them find financial support and secure legal aid for their spouses.