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China: Release Wukan villagers detained for peaceful protest and end harassing of journalists

The Chinese authorities must release villagers who had protested peacefully demanding the release of the village head and an end of illegal land seizure and stop barring journalists from reporting on the protests in Wukan village, Lufeng city in Guangdong province.

On the night of 14 September, the police of the Lufeng city removed five journalists from Hong Kong media outlets – Mingpao, the South China Morning Post and HK01 - who tried to report on the on-going protests in Wukan. Three of the journalists were beaten and taken away while in Wukan village and two were taken away outside of Wukan while they were trying to get into the village. The police held the journalists in custody for five to six hours. The police checked the journalists' mobile phones to see if there were any communications with villagers and asked them to sign statements promising not to report on the Wukan protests in the future. In the end, the police escorted the journalists to Shenzhen, a major city in Guangdong province which is located just across the northern border of Hong Kong.

Clashes broke out when the Public Security Bureau in Lufeng city, announced on the morning of 13 September that they had detained 13 villagers, including Cai Jialin, Zhang Xiangkeng and Yang Jinzhen, for allegedly “gathering a crowd to disrupt order in a public place” and “disrupting traffic”. Footages shared by villagers on social media showed that riot police had entered Wukan in the early hours of 13 September, and had broken into houses of some villagers and detained them. Before that, villagers in Wukan had protested peacefully since 19 June 2016 calling for an end of illegal land seizure and the release of their village head Lin Zuluan.

Video footage shared by villagers on social media on 13 September showed riot police in helmets and shields clashing with villagers. Some villagers threw bricks at the police. Police used tear gas and fired rubber bullets at villagers. Pictures shared on social media showed villagers with injuries and bleeding wounds. In addition to the 13 villagers taken away before the escalation of the protests, dozens of other villagers have been detained since. Five villagers are sought by the authorities.

Amnesty International calls on the Chinese authorities to immediately and unconditionally release those villagers of Wukan village who are detained solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

Background

Lin Zuluan was elected as the village chief in 2012 after leading protests in 2011 against what is alleged to have been illegal land grabs, in which the local government was criticized for secretly selling off farmland to developers without public consultation. In June 2016, Lin Zuluan prepared an application to the county government, alleging that government officials and businessmen had colluded to illegally sell confiscated land. He also criticized the government for failing to settle the land disputes over the past four years. However, he was detained right before a planned village assembly in June 2016 and was sentenced on 8 September to three years' imprisonment for allegedly taking bribes. The trial was held under tight security. The authorities barred his family from hiring their own lawyers and instead Lin Zuluan was represented by two government-appointed lawyers.

Under international law, if a public protest turns violent and use of force becomes necessary, the police must limit such force to the minimum extent necessary to contain the situation, and any police use of force should be directed towards those demonstrators only who act in a violent way.

Tear gas and rubber bullets can result in serious injury and even death. Only law enforcement officials who are rigorously trained and under strict command according to professional standards set by the United Nations and others for the legitimate use of force should be authorized to handle such equipment. The police must ensure that medical assistance is given at the earliest possible moment to anyone injured.