

URGENT ACTION

DISAPPEARED ACTIVIST AT RISK OF TORTURE

Gao Zhisheng, a former prisoner of conscience and human rights lawyer, is subject to enforced disappearance. No information about his whereabouts are known since he was taken away from his home in Yulin City, Shaanxi, northwest China, on 13 August 2017. Gao Zhisheng previously shared his experience of repeated torture in detention as a result of his work, raising fears that he is at high risk of torture and other ill-treatment or even death.

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

Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi
14 Dongchanganjie, Dongchengqu
Beijing Shi 100741
People's Republic of China
Email: gabzfwz@mps.gov.cn

Dear Minister Zhao,

Gao Zhisheng, an activist and human rights lawyer, has not been seen or heard from since he was first reported missing by his family on 13 August 2017. He has been subject to enforced disappearance, raising fear of torture and other ill-treatment.

Local police in Jia County and Yulin City, both located in the northern Chinese province of Shaanxi, denied that he was being held in police custody and that they knew his whereabouts shortly after he was reported missing by his family. After receiving no information for over three weeks, Gao Zhisheng's family finally learned on 5 September 2017 that he had been taken to Beijing. The government official who relayed this news to his elder brother refused to provide details about Gao Zhisheng's exact whereabouts, his current condition or the grounds for his detention.

Two lawyers appointed by Gao Zhisheng's family visited Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau and Jia County Public Security Bureau on 12 October and 8 November respectively intending to seek further information about his detention. Yet, the authorities refused to disclose any information to the lawyers. On 11 November 2017, an officer of the Security Maintenance Office in Gao Zhisheng's hometown - Lu township - told a Radio Free Asia reporter that Gao was in the custody of the local national security office in Jia county and his condition was fine. However, according to Gao Zhisheng's wife, no one in the family had been told about this. Since then, Gao's family has received no additional information or official notification of his arrest.

A former prisoner of conscience, Gao Zhisheng previously shared his experience of previous enforced disappearance and repeated torture in detention as a result of his work, raising fears that Gao Zhisheng is at high risk of torture and other ill-treatment or even death.

Therefore, we call on you to:

- **Immediately and unconditionally release Gao Zhisheng if he has been detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression; and**
- **Pending his release, immediately disclose the whereabouts of Gao Zhisheng, and ensure that he is not subjected to torture or other ill-treatment; and he has regular, unrestricted access to his family, lawyers of his choice, and medical care on request or as necessary.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Gao Zhisheng is one of the most respected human rights lawyers in China, with the Ministry of Justice naming him "one of the nation's top 10 lawyers" in 2001 for his pro bono work on public interest cases. Despite this, Gao Zhisheng has been subjected to enforced disappearance, torture, illegal house arrest and detention as a result of his work, which includes representing human rights activists and working on other politically sensitive cases. In late 2005, the Beijing Municipal Justice Bureau revoked his lawyer's license and suspended the operations of his law firm, Shengzhi Law Office. This was a direct result of Gao Zhisheng's open letters to the government calling on them to stop religious persecution, including persecution of Falun Gong practitioners.

In February 2006 Gao Zhisheng organized a hunger strike campaign to draw attention to the persecution of human rights activists in China. Shortly after the campaign ended, the authorities detained Gao Zhisheng on 22 August and held him without charge. After a month, on 21 September, he was charged with the vaguely-defined offence of "inciting subversion of state power". In December 2006, he was given a three-year suspended prison sentence with a five-year reprieve.

In April 2010, he told Associated Press in an interview that he was tortured while in detention. Shortly after that he went missing again and his whereabouts were unknown for almost 20 months. In December 2011, state media announced that Gao Zhisheng had violated terms of his suspended sentence and was therefore sent to serve his three-year sentence in prison.

Due to the constant harassment by authorities, including freezing the family bank accounts and preventing his children from attending school, Gao Zhisheng's family fled China in March 2009 and currently reside in the United States. In October 2010, his daughter Grace Geng wrote an open letter to the President of the United States of America saying "President Obama, as the father of two girls yourself, please ask President Hu Jintao of China to tell this daughter where her father is." After he was released from prison in 2014, Gao Zhisheng has been living with his elder brother's family in an isolated village in Shaanxi province under tight surveillance. His family said he had suffered abuse in prison and malnutrition that led to severe damage to his teeth which, three years later, still makes it difficult for him to eat solid food. According to his family, the authorities had barred Gao Zhisheng from leaving the village to receive medical and dental treatment. Despite his difficult situation, he has remained outspoken about human rights and continues to criticize the Chinese Communist Party.

In 2016, Gao Zhisheng launched a memoir titled "The year 2017, Stand Up China" with the help of his daughter Grace Geng. In the book, Gao Zhisheng detailed his treatment while in detention from 2009 to 2014 and told of his life after he was released and sent to Shaanxi to live under round-the-clock police surveillance with his elder brother, Gao Yisheng. He wrote the book as a way of continuing his resistance against human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese authorities.

Activists and human rights defenders in China continued to be systematically subjected to monitoring, harassment, intimidation, arrest and detention. Few punishments are as cruel and deliberate as enforced disappearances. People are wrenched away from their loved ones by state officials or others acting on their behalf. They deny the person is in their custody or refuse to say where they are. Families are plunged into a state of anguish, trying to keep the flame of hope alive while fearing the worst. They may be in this limbo for years.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Chinese and English

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 27 May 2019

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

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Gao Zhisheng, (he, him, his)

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/7545/2017/en/>