

# URGENT ACTION

## COVID-19 JOURNALIST TORTURED FOR EXPOSING TRUTH

Citizen journalist Zhang Zhan, who reported stories related to COVID-19 from Wuhan starting in February 2020, has been detained and charged with “picking quarrels and provoking trouble”. Zhang Zhan went missing on 15 May in Wuhan and was subsequently revealed to have been detained by police in Shanghai, more than 640km away. At the Pudong New District Detention Centre in Shanghai, Zhang has reportedly been forcibly fed by officials after she began a hunger strike. She is also being shackled and her hands have been bound 24 hours a day for more than three months, and there is grave fear for her health and well-being and risk of further torture and other ill-treatment.

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

**Chief Procurator Zhang Bencai**  
Shanghai People's Procuratorate  
648, Jianguo West Road,  
Xuhui District, Shanghai Shi 200030  
People's Republic of China

Dear Chief Procurator Zhang:

I am writing to express my grave concern for citizen journalist **Zhang Zhan (张展)**, who has been detained by police in Shanghai and is currently being held at Pudong New District Detention Centre. She is being arbitrarily detained simply for exercising her human right to freedom of opinion and expression, as enshrined in Article 19 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Zhang Zhan travelled to Wuhan in February 2020 to report on the COVID-19 outbreak there. She reported on the detention of independent reporters, as well as the harassment of victims' family members. She was indicted on 15 September on charges of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble” (寻衅滋事罪), for which she faces up to five years in prison. I find it deeply disturbing that she is facing such punishment merely for reporting news about a matter of public interest.

Zhang Zhan has chosen to be on hunger strike as a way of protesting her detention and asserting her innocence. Despite her intention to continue, the authorities in the detention centre have reportedly force-fed her against her will. She is also made to wear leg shackles and her hands have been restrained 24 hours a day for more than three months. These actions imposed on Zhang Zhan violate the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, which is a violation of China's obligations under international human rights law. I am extremely worried about the impact these actions have had on Zhang Zhan's health, which has deteriorated rapidly since September, and have grave concerns for her health and well-being.

**I therefore call on you to:**

- **Release Zhang Zhan immediately and unconditionally, unless there is sufficient credible and admissible evidence that she has committed an internationally recognized offence and is granted a fair trial in line with international standards;**
- **Respect Zhang Zhan's right to health, autonomy and expression, stop force-feeding her unless medically necessary and legitimately carried out, and ensure that she has prompt and regular access to medical attention and adequate health care.**
- **Pending her release, ensure that Zhang Zhan has regular, unrestricted access to family and lawyers of her choice and is not subject to torture or other ill-treatment;**

Yours sincerely,

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Zhang Zhan, a former lawyer, is a citizen journalist active in speaking out about politics and human rights issues in China. In February 2020, Zhang Zhan travelled to Wuhan, which was then the centre of the COVID-19 outbreak in China. She used online platforms (including WeChat, Twitter and YouTube) to report on the detention of other independent reporters as well as the harassment of victims' families.

According to information provided by her defence lawyer, Zhang Zhan started a hunger strike in late June 2020 to protest her detention and assert her innocence. Despite her intention to continue, detention centre authorities reportedly begun forcibly feeding her through a feeding tube, and it is reported that her cellmates were also involved in the act of forcibly feeding her. Zhang's defence lawyer also reports that she is physically very weak and suffering from stomach pain, dizziness and weakness while walking. The lawyer also reported that Zhang Zhan is being forced to wear shackles and that her hands have been restrained 24 hours a day for more than three months.

Citizen journalists were the primary, if not only, source of uncensored and first-hand information about the COVID-19 outbreak in China. There are not many citizen journalists as they are not able to obtain the official accreditation required to report news. Citizen journalists in China face consistent harassment and repression for reporting news and disseminating information that is censored by the government.

There have been many reports of independent journalists and activists having been harassed by authorities for sharing information about COVID-19 on social media. These include outspoken lawyer and citizen journalist Chen Qiushi, who reported being harassed by the authorities after posting footage from hospitals in Wuhan, and Wuhan resident Fang Bin, who was briefly taken away by the authorities after posting a video purporting to show corpses of COVID-19 victims.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, numerous articles relating to the virus have been censored, including those by mainstream media organizations such as *Caijing* (财经) and a subsidiary of *Beijing Youth Daily* (北京青年报). Certain social media posts, sensitive hashtags and demands for freedom of expression have all been quickly deleted or censored.

The crime of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (寻衅滋事罪) under Article 293 of the Chinese Criminal Law is a broadly defined and vaguely worded offence that has been widely used to target activists and human rights defenders. Although the crime originally applied to acts that disrupted order in public places, since 2013 the scope has expanded to include online space as well. Anyone convicted could face a maximum of five years in prison.

**PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET:** English or Chinese

You can also write in your own language.

**PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL:** 15 February 2021

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

**NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN:** Zhang Zhan (she/her)