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China: Legal activist's sister-in-law detained as harassment intensifies

The Chinese authorities must release the sister-in-law of a prominent human rights activist and end the ongoing harassment of his relatives living in Shandong Province, Amnesty International said.

On Wednesday afternoon Linyi city authorities detained Ren Zongju – sister-in-law of Chinese legal activist Chen Guangcheng. She was accused of “harbouring” her son, Chen Kegui, last year after he allegedly assaulted security officials. The officers had been searching for his uncle, Chen Guangcheng, after he escaped illegal house arrest.

Before her latest detention, Ren Zongju was previously held and then released on bail.

“This new detention – a full year after Chen Guangcheng’s escape – seems aimed at punishing him and his family for his continued outspoken criticism of the Chinese government since leaving China,” said Catherine Baber, Asia-Pacific Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“Ren Zongju must be either charged with an internationally recognized criminal offence or released immediately.”

String of harassment

Chen Guangcheng’s older brother Chen Guangfu, husband of Ren Zongju, has reported threats and harassment against the family.

On 18 April, a dead chicken and duck were hurled at Chen Guangfu and Ren Zongju’s house – bird flu has recently become a concern in China.

Two days later, dozens of posters went up around the village with threats accusing them of being traitors to China and supporting Taiwanese independence. That evening, their house was pelted with stones, breaking glass and damaging roof tiles. The next morning, Chen Guangfu found more dead fowl outside his door, as well as burnt paper – in China, burnt paper money is placed on graves. He also found 20 of his poplar trees uprooted.

The family believe that this harassment is organized or instigated by the local authorities.

Also on 20 April, another brother, who lives about 50km away, found that his car had been damaged and his tyres slashed. He replaced the tyres, but the next morning he found the new ones had also been slashed.

It has also been reported that four individuals who sought to visit Chen family were beaten by the local security forces and held at the local police station for 16 hours.

“In China we’ve seen a pattern of the authorities singling out family members and associates of prominent government critics and human rights defenders for intimidation – this must be stopped immediately,” said Baber.

Chen Guangcheng’s escape

Chen Guangcheng is a legal activist best known for exposing forced abortion and sterilization practices in Shandong Province’s Linyi County, and for seeking legal redress for the victims. He also gave legal support to many others whose rights have been violated, including farmers forcibly removed from their land without due process or compensation.

Before his escape in late April 2012, he had been under illegal house arrest for 19 months. His home had become a virtual prison for him, his wife and their daughter.

During his time under house arrest, Chen was prevented from seeking medical treatment. The couple were also prevented from meeting their wider family, including their young son, who lived elsewhere with an aunt so that he could attend school.

After his escape, Chen Guangcheng sought refuge in the US Embassy in Beijing, who then negotiated his family’s departure to the US. Once in the USA the activist issued a video in which he raises the ill-treatment of numerous human rights defenders at the hands of the Chinese authorities.

After Chen’s escape, his wife, Yuan Weijing, was beaten, kicked and wrapped up in a blanket by plainclothes security forces.