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China must end land grabs amid protests over death in custody

Amnesty International today called on Chinese authorities to end violent and illegal land grabs, as protests by villagers in the southern province of Guangdong continued following the death in custody of land rights advocate Xue Jinbo.

Villagers in Wukan have been protesting what they said was the local government's latest attempt to secretly sell off their farmland to developers. The villagers said local Communist Party officials had not consulted them on the sale and that they only learned of it after construction work began.

Xue Jinbo, 43, died on Sunday, his third day in custody. He was one of five people detained last Friday on suspicion of leading a demonstration in September, during which protesters stormed government buildings and overturned police cars. Riot police responded by beating up villagers, including at least two children, according to media reports.

"The authorities must allow an immediate and independent investigation into the death of Xue Jinbo, to prove that he did not die because of ill treatment or torture at the hands of the authorities," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Asia-Pacific.

"Sadly, despite government rhetoric pledging to protect citizens from rights violations during evictions, we continue to document reports of residents getting beaten up, detained, or even killed while trying to protect their land—sometimes by the very authorities who are supposed to protect them."

Family members and villagers told reporters Xue Jinbo appeared to have been tortured as he had dark bruises and cuts on his face as well as what appeared to be two broken thumbs.

Officials from Shanwei City, which oversees Wukan, said in a statement that they interrogated Xue twice during custody. They claim he "confessed" to being part of the 21 September incident, including "destroying public property."

On Sunday, they said, he appeared ill and they sent him to the hospital, where he died from cardiac failure 30 minutes after arriving. The authorities said Zhongshan University Forensic Department conducted an "investigation" and confirmed the cause of death, but that they would be open to an autopsy.

Police descended on Wukan on Friday to arrest Xue Jinbo and four others who had been representing the villagers in the protest against the land seizure. On Sunday morning, up to a thousand armed police approached the village, according to media reports, but villagers blocked them from entering. Police used tear gas and water canons against the villagers but in the end retreated, forming a blockade around the village.

The forcible and often violent eviction of citizens from their homes and farms is a common occurrence across China—in the cities and the countryside.

Contrary to international human rights law and standards, Chinese citizens rarely have an opportunity for genuine consultation before eviction, rarely receive adequate information on the nature or purpose of the eviction and often receive little or no compensation.

Citizens have almost no way to fight a proposed eviction. Courts often won't accept cases related to land grabs or eviction for fear of angering local officials, who depend on revenues from land sales to supplement their budgets.

Earlier in the year, the government passed regulations that provide urban residents with some protections against forced evictions, but the regulations leave the vast majority of China's population unprotected, including renters and rural residents.

"China's leaders have said they want local officials to put residents' rights, health and well-being foremost in their pursuit of modernization and growth" said Catherine Baber.

"Unfortunately citizens tell us over and over that their rights are being sacrificed for profit".