

# URGENT ACTION

## COVID-19 JOURNALIST AT RISK OF DYING IN PRISON

Citizen journalist Zhang Zhan, who has been on partial hunger strike in protest of her incarceration, is at grave risk of death and her family do not expect her to live through the winter if she is not released on medical grounds. Her family learned on 14 October, through a video call that was cut short by the authorities, that Zhang Zhan had again been restrained for 11 days to prevent the removal of her feeding tube. An intervention that violates the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment while in detention. The Chinese government must release Zhang Zhan immediately so that she can end her partial hunger strike and receive the appropriate medical treatment she so desperately needs to stay alive.

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

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Dear President Xi,

I am writing to express grave concern for the life of citizen journalist **Zhang Zhan (张展)**, who has been on partial hunger strike in protest of her incarceration. A prisoner of conscience imprisoned solely for peacefully exercising her right to freedom of expression when she reported about COVID-19, Zhang Zhan should not have spent a single day in prison.

It is alarming to learn that, due to her dire health condition, Zhang Zhan's family do not expect her to live through the winter if she is not immediately released on medical grounds. Feeling incredibly weak, she reportedly has no energy to walk nor raise her head and, with yellowed skin, looks to be suffering from a life-threatening condition.

Following an interrupted video call on 14 October, her family were distressed to find out that Zhang Zhan had again been forced fed and was restrained for 11 days to prevent her removing her feeding tube. Instead of respecting her right to express her opinion and her choice to be on hunger strike, the prison authorities punished her in a manner that violated the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment, going against China's obligations under international human rights law.

It is further worrying that Zhang Zhan still does not have regular access to her family members and lawyers and there is no way to verify her health and wellbeing.

**There is an alarming pattern of deaths of imprisoned Chinese activists, either in detention or after being belatedly released on medical parole. To ensure that no one else dies while in your detention facilities, I urge you to:**

- **Release Zhang Zhan immediately and unconditionally, so that she is able to receive the appropriate medical treatment,**
- **Pending her release, respect Zhang Zhan's right to health, autonomy and expression, and ensure that she has prompt and regular access to medical attention,**
- **Pending her release, ensure that Zhang Zhan has regular, unrestricted access to her family and lawyers of her choice and is not subjected further to torture or other ill-treatment.**

Yours sincerely,

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Zhang Zhan, a former lawyer, is a citizen journalist who has actively spoken out about politics and human rights issues in China. In February 2020, she travelled to Wuhan, 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. Zhang Zhan went missing on 14 May in Wuhan and was subsequently revealed to have been detained by police in Shanghai, more than 640 km away.

Zhang Zhan was able to have a [video call with her family](#) on 14 October for four minutes and nine seconds. The mandated duration of the call is supposed to be five minutes. Looking incredibly thin and determined to continue her partial hunger strike, her family do not expect her to live through the winter if she is not released on medical grounds. Zhang Zhan was again able to speak to her family through another video call on 29 October. They shared that her condition had further weakened, and she has no energy to walk nor raise her head. Of further concern is the yellow colour of her skin, a sign of a potential life-threatening condition.

Zhang Zhan started a hunger strike in June 2020 to protest her detention and assert her innocence. Despite her intention to continue with her protest, detention centre authorities reportedly began 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 said she is physically very weak and suffering from stomach pain, dizziness and weakness while walking. It is also reported that Zhang Zhan was forced to wear shackles and that her hands were restrained 24 hours a day for more than three months as punishment for her hunger strike.

The Pudong New District People's Court sentenced Zhang Zhan to four years in prison on 28 December 2020. The charge against her of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" stemmed from her Covid-19 reports. In April 2021, Zhang Zhan's family received notification that Zhang was transferred to Shanghai Women's Prison. Zhang Zhan has continued to carry out a partial hunger strike since being transferred to prison, eating only light snack such as biscuits or *mantou* (small, steamed buns).

There is an alarming pattern of deaths of imprisoned Chinese activists, either in detention or after being belatedly released on medical parole.

In July 2017, human rights activist and Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo died in custody after the authorities refused his and his family's requests to receive treatment abroad for his cancer. The same year, Chinese writer and government critic Yang Tongyan (pen name Yang Tianshui) died three months after being released on medical parole and undergoing an operation to remove a brain tumour. Beijing activist and prominent campaigner Cao Shunli died from organ failure after months in custody in March 2014. She was denied appropriate medical treatment while in jail.

Citizen journalists were the primary, if not the only, source of uncensored and first-hand information about the Covid-19 outbreak in China. There are not many citizen journalists in China, as they are not able to obtain official accreditation 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 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.

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, the scope has expanded since 2013 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:** 16 January 2022

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

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

**LINK TO PREVIOUS UA:** <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa17/4655/2021/en/>