

Chinese Christian Describes Torture, Coerced Testimony in Labor Camp

Though Sarah Lui has been released, hundreds from the South China Church, including its pastor, remain in prison

A Christian woman imprisoned for years in China has exposed some of the abuses that occur in labor camps, describing her arrest and torture at a February press conference in Washington, D.C.

A Christian since 1989 and a leader in the South China Church, one of the largest unregistered churches in China, Sarah Liu was arrested May 27, 2001, on her 30th birthday, when Chinese military police broke up a worship service being held in a local Christian's home.

The church's pastor, Gong Shengliang, escaped, but Lui faced her third arrest. Previously she had been tortured and eventually released, but this time was different.

"I was interrogated in a bedroom," she said. "Seven male policemen surrounded me. They started laughing at me and cursing me, then started touching my body and asked me what did I do. I said 'I'm just a Christian believer.' And one said sarcastically, 'Why don't you believe in the Communist Party [instead of] this foreign god?'"

As the night wore on, it became clear that the police wanted Lui to testify that Gong had raped her. She refused.

The police then shackled her feet and began beating her legs and back, she recalled. One officer whipped her toes with a metal coat hanger. When she fell, they bashed her head into the wall until she passed out.

"The pain was so great that I could hardly breathe," she said. "They said I was only pretending to be dead. The shackles bit into my feet and ankles such that wherever I walked was covered with blood."

Again they asked her to make a false confession against Gong, and again she refused.

Using an electric prod, the police shocked every part of her body. When she cried out, they shoved the prod in her mouth.

"Then they tried to take off my clothes, but I resisted," she recalled. "They kicked me and shoved me into a corner and pulled off my clothes."

In the end, two officers forced a weakened Lui to fingerprint some documents, one of which she said was otherwise blank. As a result of several similarly coerced accusations by women in the South China Church, pastor Gong and three church leaders were sentenced to death. The women, including Lui, were put in prison.

Wracked with guilt for playing a role in pastor Gong's conviction, Lui said she wanted to die. "But in my heart there was a deep cry," she said. "And in my heart I said, 'No, I will not reject Jesus. I want to live. I want to live and tell the truth about what is really happening to the South China Church.'"

Due to an overwhelming international outcry coordinated by China Aid and other international organizations that work to assist persecuted Christians, the Chinese believers received a second trial. Pastor Gong and those condemned to death were instead given life sentences. Lui and four other women were declared innocent and released.

Though cleared of any crime, Lui was sentenced to three years of "re-education through labor." She was sent to a labor camp, where she was forced to assemble electronics and work in the fields. Christians were forbidden from praying or reading the Bible. Lui said they were treated like members of an evil cult and assigned onerous tasks. Lui said she passed out from exhaustion twice.

Released in February 2004, Lui said her freedom came with the warning that she would be rearrested if she were ever to resume practicing Christianity. She said she lived in constant fear. Eventually, with the help of China Aid and other organizations, she received refugee status in the United States in January.

In the last 10 years more than 8,900 members of the South China Church have been arrested, and many are still in prison. According to the latest reports from China Aid, Gong continues to serve his life sentence and is dying in his prison cell.

Lui hopes to one day return to a China that honors religious freedom as government leaders have promised in multiple international covenants and its own constitution. In the meantime, she wants to draw attention to religious persecution in China and the suffering of Gong and others affiliated with the South China Church.

David Mundy in Washington, D.C.