

China Cuts Visitation Rights of Imprisoned Christian House-Church Leader

International Christian Concern (ICC) has learned that visitation rights for the family of a prominent Christian house-church leader in Xinjiang, China, have been severely curtailed. The case of Alimujiang Yimiti, a Christian convert from Islam, attracted international attention in 2008 after he was arrested for engaging in Christian activities and sentenced to an unusually harsh 15 years of imprisonment on charges of “illegally providing state secrets to foreigners.”

Chinese prison authorities informed Alimujiang’s wife, Gulinuer, last week that she would only be allowed to visit her husband once every three months and that these visits would be limited to 10 minutes. Previously, Gulinuer, along with Alimujiang’s mother and two young children, had been allowed visits once a month for up to 20 minutes.

The announcement came as a shock to human rights groups that have campaigned for Alimujiang’s release. His initial detention back in 2008 not only drew international criticism of China’s human rights practices but a ruling from the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention that his arrest was arbitrary, based solely on his religious faith and religious activities, and a violation of multiple articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In an interview with ICC, Mark Shan, senior news analyst for human rights group ChinaAid, said the new restrictions on visitation rights was not only atypical and illegal but may be partially attributed to a political transition taking place in Xinjiang province. According to Shan, such transitions often lead to tighter restrictions on “dissident” groups such as

Christians. Other sources, including Gulinuer, believe the new restrictions may be a result of Alimujiang's refusal to halt his appeals process.

However most observers have little hope Alimujiang's remaining 11 years of imprisonment will be commuted. Appeals made to local and federal authorities within China have been almost completely ignored. "There is little left for his attorney to do," says Shan. "In this case it is not the rule of law, it is the rule of people and power [that matters]."

"Fifteen years is far too long, but if people [in the West] don't pray, if they don't write to their representatives, if pressure isn't applied from here, I don't think Alimujiang has much chance of being released early," added Shan.

Ryan Morgan, ICC's regional manager for Southeast Asia, said, "The new restrictions on family visits to Alimujiang announced by Chinese authorities last week are simply one more indicator of how little Chinese officials truly respect the rule of law. This man has been wrongfully imprisoned on trumped-up charges for almost five years simply because of his religious beliefs. He was also sentenced in secret, beaten up, and denied access to his family for more than two years at one point. With cases like this, how can China possibly claim to protect religious freedom? We call on authorities in Xinjiang province to not only lift these restrictions but to immediately begin taking the necessary steps to secure Alimujiang Yimiti's release."

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