

Chinese Christian Rights Activist Gao Zhisheng Released

Christian human rights activist Gao Zhisheng, kidnapped by state security agents on Feb. 4, 2009, has been released, though he appears unable to move or speak freely.

On April 6, Gao told Bob Fu, president of the China Aid Association (CAA), by telephone that he had just returned to his Beijing apartment from his guarded location in Shanxi Province.

“Gao Zhisheng and his family have suffered deeply from the long separation,” Fu stated on CAA’s website. “Despite the persecution, he continues to trust the Lord.”

On Jan. 9, 2009, less than a month before Gao was abducted in his home village in Shaanxi Province, his family members began their escape from China. His wife, Geng He, along with then 16-year-old daughter Geng Ge and then 5-year-old son Gao Tianyu, arrived on foot to Thailand and eventually reached New York City on March 14, 2009.

With Fu and with reporters from The Associated Press (AP) this week, Gao declined to discuss his physical condition or how he was treated during his captivity. He told the AP that by leaving his role as a critic of human rights violations in China, he hopes to be re-united with his family.

“Gao is still not able to speak or move freely,” Fu said on the CAA website. “We urge the Chinese government now to allow Gao Zhisheng to be reunited with his family. It is his right, according the Chinese law, to be able to see them, since he has broken no laws during his time of probation.”

Gao's disappearance had drawn protests from international human rights groups, U.S. and British officials and the United Nations. He had defended house church Christians and coal miners as well as members of the banned Falun Gong, which fuses Buddhist-inspired teachings with forms of meditation. In 1999 Beijing banned it as an "evil cult."

Early in 2009, Gao authorized CAA to release his account of 50 days of torture by state-sponsored thugs in September and October of 2007. Gao had written the account in November 2007 while under house arrest in Beijing after prolonged beatings and electric shocks on his mouth and genitals.

Gao's suffering in the fall of 2007 followed an open letter he wrote to the U.S. Congress describing China's torture of Falun Gong members and other human rights abuses.

Another Harsh Year Expected

Chinese Christians can expect more attacks on large urban churches, more harsh punishments for house church leaders and tighter control of registered churches this year, according to CAA.

In a report summarizing persecution it monitored in 2009, CAA identified five key trends in China's management of Protestant Christianity.

Authorities last year specifically targeted house church leaders, sometimes handing out harsh sentences and fines; carried out violent raids on large urban churches; attempted to disrupt regular worship meetings and tightened control of churches registered with the government-approved Three-Self Protestant Movement (TSPM).

In response, some urban churches engaged in a "power encounter" with local governments, refusing to quietly allow officials to close or destroy their meeting places, CAA noted. For example, almost 1,000 members of Beijing Shouwang church

on Nov. 1 worshiped in Haidian Park during a snowstorm after officials pressured Huajie Plaza managers not to renew the church rental contract.

These trends were confirmed by a Chinese House Church Alliance (CHCA) report, released in December, which described harassment and arrest of church leaders, violent raids on house churches and the oppression of TSPM churches.

While CAA reported only 77 incidents in 2009, these occurred throughout China, giving a broad indication of the status of Protestant Christians, particularly those in unregistered churches. A total of 2,935 people were affected in these incidents, a 44.8 percent increase from 2008. Of these, 389 were arrested, a decrease in arrests of 49 percent; and 23 were sentenced to prison, a decline of 34 percent.

Of the 389 people arrested, 211 were church leaders. Several received harsh prison sentences and fines, including Beijing bookstore owner and church leader Shi Weihuan, who on June 12 was sentenced to three years in prison and fined 150,000 RMB (US\$21,945). Xinjiang officials on Aug. 6 sentenced Uyghur church leader Alimjan Yimit (Alimujiang Yimiti in Chinese) to 15 years in prison, while a day later, officials in Inner Mongolia sentenced church leaders Li Ming-shun and Zhang Yong-hu to 10 and seven years respectively, with fines of 30,000 (US\$4,390) and 20,000 (US\$2,925) RMB.

A court in Shanxi Province in November awarded five Linfen church pastors sentences ranging from three to seven years, with fines ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 RMB (US\$1,462 to US\$7,315). A further five pastors were sentenced to two years in labor camp.

At least 400 paramilitary police violently raided the Fushan county branch of Linfen church on Sept. 13, injuring a few dozen church members, confiscating Bibles and money and damaging church property. A similar raid was carried out on

another large church in Shanxi Province in November.

Authorities also sealed or destroyed both house church and TSPM church buildings. In one prominent case last June, officials in Chengdu city, Sichuan Province declared Quiyu church to be an illegal organization, forcing the church to close and confiscating church property.

Officials in Rizhao city, Shandong province, raided a training event at a TSPM church and de-registered two church meeting places, CAA reported, while CHCA reported that officials tore down the meeting place of Changchun church in Ninan city, Shandong Province, giving only token compensation.

Churches in 'Grey' Zone

Chinese scholar and former policy writer Liu Peng believes the government is attempting to remove the "grey" zone in Protestant Christianity, where some churches operate openly without legal status.

China now permits churches to bypass joining the TSPM when registering, but many house church groups reject this solution. Leaders would prefer churches to be in one camp or the other, Liu said in a December interview with the *China Daily*.

In predicting harsher treatment this year, CAA quoted Wang Zuoan, head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, who in January told *Oriental Outlook* that the "reluctance, intimidation and inability" of local governments to deal with religious issues must be addressed.

If these words represent China's religious policy direction in 2010, churches are likely to be targets of greater persecution, CAA concluded.