

Church in China to End Outdoor Services; Gao Zhisheng Alive

Key issues in Chinese religious rights are taking a pivotal turn at year's end as the beleaguered Shouwang house church in Beijing will celebrate its last outdoor service on Christmas Day, and "disappeared" human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng has ostensibly resurfaced—in an undisclosed prison.

Denied access to a building they had purchased as a worship venue, the Shouwang church has been meeting outdoors—and facing weekly arrests—since April 10. A source in Beijing told Compass that next year church leaders will renew their fight to retain the venue the government had denied the congregation.

"Shouwang's governing committee said that this coming Christmas, which fell on a Sunday this year, would see the last outdoor worship since it began on April 10," the source said. "They said the church would actively pursue realizing the goal of returning to meet indoors after Christmas. And they still believe the best way to resolve the issue is that the government would permit the church to enter into the space it bought."

Shouwang held its 37th outdoor service last on Dec. 18. According to a Dec. 20 post on Shouwang's Facebook page, as Christmas approaches the police presence has increased at the plaza where the church has been meeting. Many church members were detained at home on Dec. 17 to prevent them from traveling to the plaza. Police detained a further 35 either on arrival or on their way to the designated venue and violently seized five church members who had gathered outside Haidian Street police station to meet with detainees.

Church leaders said in the post that they are hoping for a resolution to Shouwang's dilemma this Christmas.

"Today is the day we call all the members of our church to fast and pray for Shouwang," the post stated. "May God have mercy on his church ... and grant us the place for worshipping that he prepared for His church."

Church leaders have issued an appeal for prayer for "the key to the space the church has bought may be given before Christmas so that the issue of worship place can be solved," they said in a Dec. 16 statement. "Whether the key is secured or not by the end of 2011, may God provide a permanent worship venue so that the whole congregation can meet together."

Church leaders say the landlord of their previous venue had been under mounting pressure from authorities to terminate the lease. The government also prevented the church from using the premises it had purchased in late 2009.

Shouwang had paid 27 million yuan, or about \$4 million, for the second floor of the Daheng Science and Technology Tower in northwest Beijing's Zhongguancun area. Authorities interfered, and the property developer has refused to hand the key over to the church. Earlier this month, the church leaders said, the church paid off all the money borrowed for the space.

The members of the church's governing committee, two pastors and three elders, and other major co-workers, have been under house arrest for the whole or much of the time since April 9. Hundreds of other people, including many Shouwang parishioners and some members of other churches in Beijing and other cities, were detained for between a few hours to two days.

Gao Alive

After 20 months of secret detention, the Beijing First Intermediate People's Court ordered Christian human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng to serve what had been a suspended three-year prison sentence—supposedly for violating terms of his

probation.

The order came just as the five-year probation period for Gao expired Thursday. In 2006 he had been charged with “subverting the power of the state” for defending Christian house church members and members of the Falun Gong spiritual movement.

The state-run Xinhua News Agency reported last week that since Gao had violated terms of his probation, he would now be required to serve the prison term in an as yet unnamed facility. Mainstream press such as the *Wall Street Journal* and The Associated Press scoffed at the notion of Gao “violating” the terms of his probation when police have held him in undisclosed locations, incommunicado, for all but two months of the past three years.

This was the first sign in several months that Gao, an outspoken human rights defender and a Christian since 2005, was still alive, despite months of requests for information from family members and international advocacy groups.

Following an international outcry in 2006, Gao’s sentence was suspended but he and his family faced constant surveillance and harassment. Police tormented Gao’s wife Geng He whenever she left the house and accompanied Gao’s teenage daughter, Gege, to school.

Geng He escaped from China in early January 2009 along with her daughter and son Tianyu, and they were quickly granted political asylum in the United States, according to the China Aid Association (CAA).

Less than a month later, on Feb. 4, government agents abducted Gao, and he simply “disappeared.”

The self-taught lawyer was last seen in April 2010 when police allowed him a brief respite from his secret detention. In an interview with an AP reporter during that period, Gao said he had been shunted between detention centers, farmhouses and

apartments across north China, repeatedly beaten and abused and threatened with death.

In January 2009, AP released a report written by Gao in November 2007, while under house arrest, describing the torture he endured for a 50-day period in police custody in 2007.

Gao's family still doesn't know where he is, or which prison he'll be sent to, WSJ reported after speaking with Geng He, although friends and family say being in prison is better than "being disappeared."

Enforced Disappearances

A former Chinese political prisoner and author, Liao Yiwu, who fled China in July, claims China is currently experiencing the worst crackdown on activists since the Tiananmen Square protest in 1989, the Inter Press Service reported earlier this month.

Fearing a transfer of the so-called Arab Spring to China, government agents since mid-February have "abducted" at least 26 high-profile artists, writers and human rights defenders, holding them in secret locations, according to IPS. The news service also cited a 2009 report by Human Rights Watch that asserting that thousands of ordinary citizens who had petitioned the government on human rights issues languished in a network of "black jails" across the country, where they were subject to frequent physical and psychological abuse.

Enforced disappearances may soon be enshrined in law, according to the IPS report. China on Aug. 30 published proposed revisions to the Criminal Procedure Law that, if passed, will allow police to secretly detain suspects in cases involving state security, terrorism or severe corruption for up to six months with no right to contact their families or a lawyer.

The proposed revisions could also legalize the common tactic

of placing people under lengthy house arrests, IPS said.

Officials have illegally held blind activist Chen Guancheng under house arrest since 2010, according to the CAA.