

Drive to Release Rights Attorney in China Pushes Forward

Confirmation this week of China's assertion in December that human rights lawyer **Gao Zhisheng** is alive and serving out a prison sentence is key as efforts continue for his release, a human rights attorney said.

Zhisheng, a Christian whose advocacy for religious minorities led to his conviction in 2006 for "subversion," is serving a previously suspended sentence of three years in Shaya County Prison in Xinjiang region in western China. The government had informed Zhisheng's brother on Dec. 29 that he was detained at the remote Shaya prison, according to an urgent petition by Washington, advocacy group Freedom Now to the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, but officials had refused the family's request to visit the prisoner.

Chinese officials granted permission for Zhisheng's brother, Gao Zhiyi, to visit the rights attorney on March 24, The Associated Press reported this week.

Jared Genser, president of Freedom Now, told Compass that confirmation of his imprisonment was important, as "it was not a foregone conclusion that he was alive, given the PRC's [People's Republic of China] record for reporting on the whereabouts and health" of detainees.

"The United States has worked publicly and privately for Gao's release, but we're looking for the White House, specifically the president and vice president, to get involved, and so far this has not happened," Genser said. "We're pushing hard, but so far we're not getting a positive response."

U.S. Department of State officials and members of Congress

have voiced support for Gao's release or acted on his behalf, and Genser said he is hoping for Congress to pass a (non-binding) resolution regarding the need to free him following the violation of his rights.

The half-hour visit by Zhisheng's brother, who reportedly said that he appeared pale but in relatively good health, came after last month's visit to the White House by Vice President Xi Jinping, expected to take control of the Communist Party and thus become China's next leader. At that time, the White House said Xi had discussed "individual cases" of **human rights violations** in China with President Obama, though particulars were not revealed.

The day after the Feb. 14 visit, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney reportedly said Obama raised "the importance of human rights and America's commitment to universal values directly to Vice President Xi."

At a State Department lunch for Vice President Xi on Feb. 14, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden reportedly voiced concern that "conditions in China have deteriorated and about the plight of several very prominent individuals." The Chinese vice president's response was not revealed.

Pressures to release Zhisheng came as China's People's National Congress legalized secret detentions for up to six months on March 14.

Through a petition filed with the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention filed on Jan. 25, Freedom Now is urging foreign governments and U.N. groups to pressure China to release Zhisheng and allow him to be reunited with his wife and two children, who fled to the United States in 2009.

After his sentencing in December 2006, Zhisheng remained "in nearly total isolation, surrounded by plainclothes security forces and forbidden to leave his home, use his telephone or computer or otherwise communicate with the outside world,"

according to the petition.

After Zhisheng wrote an open letter to the U.S. Congress about human rights abuses in China, authorities “disappeared” him on Sept. 21, 2007, torturing him for more than 50 days. Gao later revealed that his captors shocked his genitals with an electric baton and piercing them with toothpicks.

“As with the torture experienced during his pretrial detention, the purpose of this mistreatment was to extract a false confession,” the Freedom Now petition notes.

State-sponsored thugs again abducted Zhisheng on Feb. 4, 2009. He reappeared on March 28, 2010, only to disappear again on April 20 of that year after security agents instructed him to return to Beijing from western China. During this short period of freedom, he described how police had stripped him and pummeled him “with handguns in holsters,” taking turns beating him for two days and nights, according to the petition.

After more than 20 months without information regarding Zhisheng’s location or condition, China acknowledged on Dec. 16 of last year that it would be taking him to prison to serve the three-year sentence imposed on Dec. 22, 2006—withdrawing the five-year probation about to expire.