

Hunger Strike Underway for Pastor, Church Members Detained in China

Fifteen lawyers representing detained Protestant pastor Zhang Shaojie and members of his church in Nanle County, Henan province, are staging a hunger strike to demand access to their clients.

According to reports from ChinaAid, AP and activists on social media, the lawyers began the strike on Thursday after having been frequently prevented from meeting with Pastor Zhang and other church members detained without formal documentation on Nov. 16. Earlier the same day, after the lawyers had tried once more to meet with Pastor Zhang, a large gang of unidentified persons surrounded the lawyers, harassed and insulted them, and stole several mobile phones.

This is the latest in a series of incidents that have hindered the lawyers' attempts to work on the case. In November, Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported the detention of Zhang, 48, who is pastor of the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement.

A number of church members who gathered in front of the police station after his detention were subsequently beaten. Then on Nov. 18, more than 100 church members and other supporters gathered in front of the City Hall to demand Pastor Zhang's unconditional release.

Lawyers representing the detained church members have constantly been denied access to their clients. On Nov. 22, lawyer Xia Jun, who was hired by the church, was finally informed that he would be allowed to meet with his client after he confronted the Nanle County Public Security Bureau director and secretary with the "mishandling" of the case.

However, when Xia and another lawyer attempted to meet with their client again on Nov. 25, the officer on duty would not allow them to enter, claiming that there had been a “power outage.”

Previously, Xia had attempted to contact the director of the Nanle County Public Security Bureau and Domestic Security Protection Squad chief, who were either too busy to talk to him or else denied responsibility for the case.

CSW’s chief executive, Mervyn Thomas, says, “We are deeply concerned that lawyers representing Pastor Zhang and the other church members have repeatedly been denied access to their clients and have even been harassed by unknown thugs. We urge Nanle County officials to allow the lawyers representing Pastor Zhang and the other church members to meet with their clients in accordance with the law.”