



Amnesty International

Group 524

May 2019



Next Meeting: Tuesday, May 21 – 7:00 p.m. – Providence Heights

May 21st at Providence Heights

When we get together at Providence Heights for our May meeting, we will add our names to Amnesty petitions – including one based on this month’s letter-writing opportunity – and sign messages of encouragement to prisoners of conscience.

One of those prisoners of conscience is **Supreme Patriarch Thich Quang Do**, in Vietnam. His situation was described in the February newsletter, and Kathy Herbst has not received any information to indicate that things have changed. According to her Amnesty contact, representatives of Amnesty have been trying to gain permission to meet with Thich Quang Do, but they have not yet been successful.

Last week, Amnesty released a new report, documenting a significant increase in the number of prisoners of conscience that are now being held in Vietnam. On Page 2, we have the AIUSA press release which summarizes that report.

New Hampshire: Death Penalty Update

In New Hampshire, the state legislature holds an early-spring session, adjourns for the summer, and then reconvenes in the fall. Before adjourning in late April, both houses of the legislature passed a death penalty abolition bill by large margins.

In May, as expected, the Republican governor vetoed the bill. In September, however, it seems likely that in both houses there will be enough votes to override the veto.

For the country as a whole, thirty states currently allow capital punishment, but in four of them (including Pennsylvania), governors have issued moratoriums on the death penalty, according to the Death Penalty Information Center. Twenty states have abolished or overturned it.

Amnesty International Group 524

Meeting Schedule: Third Tuesday of the month, at 7:00 p.m.

Meeting Location: Providence Heights
9000 Babcock Blvd., Allison Park, PA 15101



Contact John Warren (jf.warren@verizon.net or 412-766-2506) for more information on material in this mailing, or visit the Amnesty USA website (www.amnestyusa.org) or the website of Amnesty International Group 39 (amnestypgh.org).



Vietnam: Amnesty Research Reveals Major Increase in Prisoners of Conscience

On May 12th, Amnesty International issued the press release below, describing new research which documents a substantial increase in the number of prisoners of conscience that are now being held in Vietnam.

The number of prisoners of conscience unjustly jailed across Viet Nam has surged by one-third to 128, in signs of a growing crackdown on peaceful activism, new research by Amnesty International reveals today.

The Vietnamese government holds at least 128 prisoners of conscience in prisons across the country, a sharp rise from the 97 identified last year. Detention conditions remain appalling, with evidence of prisoners being tortured and otherwise ill-treated, routinely held incommunicado and in solitary confinement, kept in squalid conditions, and denied medical care, clean water, and fresh air.

Among these prisoners of conscience are an increasing number of people jailed for comments made on social media platforms such as Facebook, who now represent almost 10 percent of those jailed. With a new and deeply repressive Cybersecurity Law having taken effect on January 1, 2019, the use of invasive surveillance methods to target perceived critics is likely to intensify.

“This research shows Viet Nam’s tightening stranglehold on every area of public and private life,” said Nicholas Bequelin, Director for East and Southeast Asia at Amnesty International.

“Beyond crushing any sign of political opposition, the Vietnamese authorities are also going after anyone who challenges corruption or wants to improve communities through human rights work and activism. The right to speak one’s mind is at risk.”

The list, which likely underestimates the exact number of prisoners of conscience, includes lawyers, bloggers, human rights defenders, environmental activists and pro-democracy campaigners – all of whom were jailed solely for peacefully exercising their human rights. Many were handed long jail sentences after farcical trials, and were often detained for lengthy periods even before charges were brought against them.

“The Vietnamese authorities are clearly becoming more thin-skinned by the day. It’s their own citizens who are paying the terrible price simply because of something they said or someone they met,” said Nicholas Bequelin.

A new penal code took effect in Viet Nam in 2018. Like the previous one, it contains vague and overly broad provisions that are often used to prosecute activists and other perceived critics. At least 34 people on this list were prosecuted under provisions from the new penal code.



Vietnam: Amnesty Research Reveals Major Increase in Prisoners of Conscience (continued)

U.S. Pressed to Challenge Viet Nam at Human Rights Dialogue This Week

This new research comes as Viet Nam seeks closer diplomatic and economic ties with the United States and the European Union.

This week, US representatives will visit Vietnam to participate in a ‘human rights dialogue’ with Vietnamese counterparts. The US-Vietnam ‘human rights dialogue’ has been held regularly since 2006, after a two-year hiatus. In October 2018, prisoner of conscience MeNam, known by her blogging name ‘Mother Mushroom’, was released in the margins of a visit by then U.S. defense secretary General James Mattis.

“The rising number of prisoners of conscience shows the Vietnamese authorities’ duplicity when it comes to engaging in official discussions on human rights,” said Nicholas Bequelin.

“Mother Mushroom’s release was a huge relief – but the price of her freedom was exile, and the whole operation was a convenient diversion from the many dozens still languishing behind bars.”

A current prisoner of conscience, Tran Hoang Phuc, is in jail even though his peaceful activism was recognized by the United States in the past. Phuc was a member of the US’ Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) and was invited to meet former President Barack Obama during his state visit to Viet Nam in May 2016, although authorities denied him access to the meeting.

A pro-democracy and environmental activist, Phuc was arrested a year later, in June 2017. Tried on charges of ‘conducting propaganda against the state’ for making and sharing videos perceived to be critical of the government on social media, he was sentenced to six years in prison, followed by four years under house arrest.

“Phuc stands as a symbol for how Vietnam treats some of its brightest and most engaged citizens,” said Nicholas Bequelin.

“The authorities must release all prisoners of conscience, immediately and unconditionally.”

At the upcoming dialogue, the US government should reiterate at the highest levels that without real progress on human rights there are limits to how far the US-Vietnam relationship can go. That progress should be measured by concrete actions, including the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience.

China: Amnesty Spotlights Disappearance of Prominent Human Rights Lawyer

*In mid-April, Amnesty International updated the Urgent Action notice that it had originally issued in the fall of 2017, concerning the enforced disappearance of the prominent Chinese human rights lawyer, **Gao Zhisheng**. That action by Amnesty prompted Radio Free Asia (RFA) to publish the article which appears below. Following the article, there is a model letter for this case.*

Chinese Rights Lawyer’s Wife Uses Birthday to Mark “Disappearance”

An international rights group has raised concerns over the possible torture and mistreatment of Chinese human rights lawyer **Gao Zhisheng**, who was forcibly disappeared nearly two years ago.

“Gao Zhisheng, an activist and human rights lawyer, has not been seen or heard from since he was first reported missing by his family,” London-based Amnesty International said in an Urgent Action letter to Chinese leaders in Beijing.



“He has been subject to enforced disappearance, raising fear of torture and other ill-treatment,” Amnesty said.

Gao was reported missing from his cave dwelling in the northern Chinese province of Shaanxi on August 13, 2017. Local police in Shaanxi’s Jia county and Yulin city denied that they were holding him, but said that they knew where he was.

“After receiving no information for over three weeks, Gao Zhisheng’s family finally learned on September 5, 2017, that he had been taken to Beijing,” the Amnesty letter said.

However, the government official who gave Gao’s brother the information refused to provide details of Gao’s situation – his exact whereabouts, his current condition or the grounds for his detention, it said.

Gao's wife Geng He, who fled to the U.S. with the couple’s two children after an earlier disappearance in 2009, said she still doesn't know where he is.

“Since Gao Zhisheng was forcibly disappeared, the authorities have never informed his family where he is being held, neither have they provided an official document notifying them of his detention, or anything like it, let alone allowed his family to visit him,” Geng told RFA ahead of Gao’s birthday on April 20th.

“The local police station just keeps passing the buck,” she said. “One minute they are saying Gao Zhisheng is being held in Yulin; the next they say he’s being held in Jia county, or in Beijing.”



China: Amnesty Spotlights Disappearance of Prominent Human Rights Lawyer (continued)

Meanwhile, officials have been treating both Gao and Geng's relatives as "guilty by association," Geng said. "They have demanded that my family report to their local police station on a weekly basis and sign a report," she said. "On one occasion, one of my relatives saw the content of the report they had to sign, and it referred to me and my children as fugitives."

Geng said that while Gao's actual birthday is on April 20, she typically celebrates it on the same day as their daughter's birthday, April 17. "This year, the theme of his birthday is wanting him to come home," she said.

'No Basis in Law'

Former 1989 democracy movement leader Li Jinjin, now a New York lawyer, said there is no basis in Chinese law for forcibly disappearing somebody. "Forcible disappearance has no basis in law, and it contravenes Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution pertaining to personal liberty," Li told RFA. "Nonetheless, it is frequently employed as a tool in the internal struggles of the [ruling] Chinese Communist Party, who use it to lock up their political opponents, with no regard for their human rights," he said.

While there was a slight improvement with the enshrining of human rights into the constitution after economic reforms began in 1979, the growth of the civil rights movement has prompted growing use of extrajudicial detention, Li said. "The Chinese government has started using forcible disappearance to deal with rights defenders during the past 10 years or so," he said.

On Nov. 11, 2017, a "security maintenance" officer told RFA that Gao is being held by state security police in Jia county, and that he was "fine." But Gao's family has received no additional information since then.

Amnesty called on the Chinese government to "immediately and unconditionally release Gao Zhisheng if he has been detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression."

"Pending his release, immediately disclose the whereabouts of Gao Zhisheng, and ensure that he is not subjected to torture or other ill-treatment; and he has regular, unrestricted access to his family, lawyers of his choice, and medical care on request or as necessary," the letter said.

Gao, once a prominent lawyer feted by the ruling Chinese Communist Party, began to be targeted by the authorities after he defended some of China's most vulnerable people, including Christians, coal miners, and followers of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement.

In a published memoir, Gao details the torture he later endured at the hands of the authorities during his time in prison, as well as three years of solitary confinement, during which he said he was sustained by his Christian faith and his hopes for China.

Activists say his continuing house arrest even after being "released" from jail mirrors the treatment meted out to fellow rights lawyers and activists detained in a nationwide police operation since July 2015.



Action Opportunity: Model Letter in Behalf of Chinese Human Rights Lawyer

In the model letter below, note that Amnesty has provided us with the email addresses of the Minister of Public Security and the ambassador in Washington. When you prepare your letter or email, please don't hesitate to adapt the language of the model letter, putting the appeal into your own words.

Minister of Public Security, Zhao Kezhi
14 Dongchanganjie, Dongchengqu
Beijing Shi 100741
People's Republic of China
Email: gabzfwz@mps.gov.cn

Dear Minister Zhao:

Gao Zhisheng, an activist and human rights lawyer, has not been seen or heard from since he was first reported missing by his family on 13 August 2017. He has been subject to enforced disappearance, raising fear of torture and other ill-treatment.

Local police in Jia County and Yulin City, both located in the northern Chinese province of Shaanxi, denied that he was being held in police custody and that they knew his whereabouts shortly after he was reported missing by his family. After receiving no information for over three weeks, Gao Zhisheng's family finally learned on 5 Sept. 2017 that he had been taken to Beijing. The government official who relayed this news to his brother refused to provide details about Gao Zhisheng's exact whereabouts, his current condition or the grounds for his detention.

On 11 Nov. 2017, an officer of the Security Maintenance Office in Gao Zhisheng's hometown – Lu township – told a Radio Free Asia reporter that Gao was in the custody of the local national security office in Jia county and his condition was fine. However, according to Gao Zhisheng's wife, no one in the family had been told about this.

A former prisoner of conscience, Gao Zhisheng previously shared his experience of previous enforced disappearance and repeated torture in detention as a result of his work, raising fears that Gao Zhisheng is at high risk of torture and other ill-treatment, or even death.

Therefore, I call on you to immediately and unconditionally release Gao Zhisheng, if he has been detained solely for exercising his right to freedom of expression; and pending his release, immediately disclose the whereabouts of Gao Zhisheng, and ensure that he is not subjected to torture or other ill-treatment; and that he has regular, unrestricted access to his family, to lawyers of his choice, and to medical care on request or as necessary.

Ambassador Cui Tiankai
Embassy of the People's Republic of China
3505 International Place NW, Washington DC 20008
Email: chinaembpress_us@mfa.gov.cn
Salutation: Dear Ambassador