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CHINA Beijing house church faces continued pressure, leaders under house arrest

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) condemns the ongoing pressure on Shouwang Church, whose leaders were placed under house arrest at the weekend and 47 members detained as they attempted to worship outdoors for the second consecutive Sunday.

The church had nowhere to meet after the landlord of the building they were meeting in bowed to government pressure to prevent the congregation worshipping there.

According to China Aid, Beijing authorities put all of Shouwang's leaders under house arrest on Saturday evening, to ensure they did not attend Sunday's meeting. As the congregation gathered at Zhongguancun on Sunday morning, police detained 47 individuals. By 5:00pm Monday, they had all been released. Last week, 169 members were forced onto buses and taken into detention for questioning.

Shouwang's leadership maintains that the church's decision to meet outside is not a political act. A statement on the church's Facebook page says "Meeting outdoors is not an attempt to quarrel with the government." For several years, the church has conducted its activities openly, including posting details of services on its website. Shouwang do not want to join the officially recognized Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) church, and an application made to become government-registered in 2006 was rejected. Like many other 'house churches' in China, they operate in a legal grey area. The law only protects "normal" religious activities, and those who choose to practice their religion outside the officially sanctioned state bodies are vulnerable to accusations of illegal activity.

Heavy-handed treatment of Christians is not confined to Beijing. In Huaxian, Shaanxi Province, Pastor Wang Zhanhu was beaten by police with an electric baton on 7 April while worshipping in a public area. In a separate incident Pastor Zhang Tielin from Fanxian, Henan province, has had the door to his home bricked up by neighbours acting on police instructions on several occasions in the past six months.

These events are seen against a backdrop of a broader crackdown on dissidents, including lawyers, activists, writers, bloggers and artists. Dr Fan Yafeng, leader of the Chinese Christian Human Rights Lawyers association has been under house arrest in Beijing since November 2010 and Christian lawyer Gao Zhisheng has been missing, except for a brief reappearance in March 2010, for over two years.

CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnston said, "The continued harassment of Shouwang Church is indicative of the Chinese government's paranoia regarding religion. CSW calls upon the Chinese government to adhere to the guarantees awarded to its citizens in the Chinese constitution, which allows for freedom of religion. We also call upon the international community to defend Shouwang, whose treatment is the latest in a long list of abuses of human rights in China."

Notes to Editors:

1. In 2009 Shouwang Church raised funds and bought a 1500-metre-square office building in northwest Beijing for use by the congregation at a cost of £2.5 million. However, the building's management company has come under pressure from authorities, and as a result the church has not received the keys to the building, despite

paying for it in full. Repeated pressure on landlords of rented buildings used by the church has forced them to meet outside several times in the past two years.