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CHINA Deputy Chairman of Chinese House Church Alliance sentenced to labor camp

Pastor Shi Enhao, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese House Church Alliance, has been sentenced to two years re-education through labor (RTL) for “holding illegal meetings and organizing illegal venues for religious meetings” due to his role in the unofficial Chinese house church network.

The RTL system, through which Chinese citizens can be sentenced without a trial, was given by officials in Jiangsu. Pastor Shi, who oversees several hundred house churches with thousands of members, previously disappeared on June 12 before police confirmed his detention on June 21.

The Chinese House Church Alliance is a large umbrella organization for house churches. Leaders of the group have faced severe persecution in the past, including arrest, imprisonment and harassment. Pastor Shi has been under scrutiny for some time. According to China Aid, he served a 12-day administrative detention sentence after he was arrested on May 31 in Jiangsu province. On June 1, Pastor Shi’s home was raided by police, who took away books and papers.

It is difficult to obtain accurate details regarding the numbers of individuals held in RTL at any one time. However, in 2008 it was reported that 80,000 people were held in 300 centers across the country. The actual figure is thought to be much higher.

Pastor Shi’s criminal detention comes as a prominent Beijing house church faces ongoing repression. The 1000-member independent Shouwang Church currently has four of its leaders under house arrest and church members are being detained weekly as they attempt to worship outdoors, since their landlord was pressured to evict the congregation. Unofficial or ‘house’ churches in China are those congregations who choose, often for reasons of conscience, not to join the officially recognized Three-Self Patriotic Movement, or official Protestant Church. House churches can face persecution from authorities due to their de facto illegal status.

CSW’s National Director, Stuart Windsor said, “CSW calls upon the Chinese authorities to respect the right of religious freedom for all its citizens to worship in a place of their choice by releasing Pastor Shi Enhao, whose case is representative of countless others of ongoing repression.”