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CHINA Blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng escapes house arrest

Blind legal activist Chen Guangcheng reportedly escaped house arrest in Dongshigu village in Shandong province, on Sunday April 22, and is now safe in Beijing, according to China Aid.

News agencies report that in a video addressed to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, released following his escape, Chen Guangcheng makes a number of demands, including that Mr. Wen investigate the alleged brutal beating-up of Chen's family members. Chen Guangcheng has conveyed to China Aid his intention to "fight to the end for the freedom of my family inside China. I want to live a normal life as a Chinese citizen with my family."

China Aid also reports that police have detained He Peirong, one of the friends who helped to drive Chen from his home in Shandong Province to a safe location in another province, Chen's older brother, Chen Guangfu, and his nephew, Chen Kegui. Both father and son were taken from their home early this morning. Chen Kegui allegedly wounded some government officials with a kitchen knife in self-defense during the confrontation at their home.

Chen Guangcheng, a self-taught lawyer who has been blind since childhood, has been under attack by Chinese authorities since 2005 when he began to expose human rights abuses related to China's one-child policy. He was sentenced to four years and three months imprisonment for "intentionally damaging property" and "gathering crowds to disturb transport order". Mr. Chen, who is known as the "barefoot lawyer", has been an outspoken proponent of human rights through his legal work. Lawyers who worked to defend him during his trial in 2005 and 2006 were regularly beaten and intimidated.

He had been under house arrest with his family since his release from prison in September 2010. Recent amendments to Chinese Criminal Procedure Law now legalizes house arrest in China, however at the time Chen was first detained, it was illegal. The family was kept in severe conditions including heavy surveillance and restricted communication with the outside world. Chen's daughter was unable to attend school for some time. In February last year a number of family members were reportedly beaten up by police and plain-clothed thugs after a video was released detailing their situation. Fellow lawyers, friends, diplomats and journalists have been manhandled and denied access when trying to visit Chen.

Andrew Johnston, Advocacy Director of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "While CSW is relieved to learn that Chen Guangcheng is safe at this time, we are deeply concerned for the welfare of his friends and family members, some of whom have been detained for helping him, and call for their unconditional release. We urge the Chinese government, as a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to respect fundamental, internationally recognized human rights for all of its citizens. We also urge the European Union to raise Chen's case with the Chinese government at the upcoming EU-China human rights dialogue."