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CHINA | Lawyers Prevented From Meeting Detainees

Lawyers representing Protestant Pastor Zhang Shaojie and members of his church have encountered various obstacles that have prevented them from meeting with their clients, who were detained by police on Nov. 16 without any formal documentation.

According to reports from China Aid and comments posted by activists on social media, lawyers who have tried to meet with Pastor Zhang and the other detainees have been faced with bureaucratic obstacles, hostile officials, and ill-timed “power outages”.

Pastor Zhang, 48, belongs to the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement. On Nov. 16, police forcibly detained Pastor Zhang without any formal documentation, possibly in response to his work defending the vulnerable social groups. Zhang’s sisters and other church members were also detained, and several others were summoned to government offices. On Nov. 18, over 100 church members and other supporters gathered in front of the city hall to demand Pastor Zhang’s unconditional release.

On Nov. 22, lawyer Xia Jun, who has been hired by the church, was told he would be allowed to meet with his client the following week. This assurance was only given after he confronted the Nanle County Public Security Bureau director and secretary with the “mishandling” of the case. When Xia and another lawyer attempted to meet with their client again on Nov. 25, the officer on duty wouldn’t allow them to enter because of a “power outage”.

Previously, lawyer 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 them, or else denied responsibility for the case.

In addition to these problems, the lawyers were also prevented from teaching other church members about their rights under the law. The officials who blocked the lawyers’ entry to the church, where the lecture was to take place, provided no explanation for their actions. Some sources claim physical altercations between security officers and the lawyers and church members also occurred at the scene.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We urge the local officials in Nanle County to allow the lawyers representing Pastor Zhang and the other church members to meet with their clients in accordance with the law. We call on all the authorities involved to make clear any charges brought against the detainees, and to ensure that they have access to legal representation and meetings with their family members.”