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CHINA | Lawyers Stage Hunger Strike

Fifteen lawyers representing detained Protestant Pastor Zhang Shaojie and members of his church in Nanle County, Henan Province are staging a hunger strike to demand access to their clients.

According to reports from China Aid, AP and activists on social media, the lawyers began the strike on Dec. 12 after having been frequently prevented from meeting with Pastor Zhang and other church members detained without formal documentation on Nov. 16. Earlier the same day, after the lawyers had tried once more to meet with Pastor Zhang, a large gang of unidentified persons surrounded the lawyers, harassed and insulted them, and stole several mobile phones.

This is the latest in a series of incidents which have hindered the lawyers' attempts to work on the case. In November, Christian Solidarity Worldwide reported the detention of Zhang, 48, who is pastor of the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). A number of church members who gathered in front of the police station after his detention were subsequently beaten. On Nov. 18, over 100 church members and other supporters gathered in front of the city hall to demand Pastor Zhang's unconditional release.

Lawyers representing the detained church members have constantly been denied access to their clients. On Nov. 22, lawyer Xia Jun, who was hired by the church, was finally informed he would be allowed to meet with his client after he confronted the Nanle County Public Security Bureau director and secretary with the "mishandling" of the case. However, when Xia and another lawyer attempted to meet with their client again on Nov. 25, the officer on duty would not allow them to enter, claiming there had been a "power outage".

Previously, Xia Jun 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.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "We are deeply concerned that lawyers representing Pastor Zhang and the other church members have repeatedly been denied access to their clients, and have even been harassed by unknown "thugs". We urge Nanle County officials to allow the lawyers representing Pastor Zhang and the other church members to meet with their clients in accordance with the law."