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CHINA | Pastor Zhang Shaojie Finally Charged, Allowed Access to Lawyer

On Jan. 15, Protestant Pastor Zhang Shaojie's lawyer was able to visit him, two months after he was first detained on Nov. 16, 2013. According to Asia News, the pastor has been charged with "fraud" and "disturbing public order".

Pastor Zhang was detained by police on Nov. 16 without any formal documentation. In a social media post, Lawyer Liu Weiguo said he had met with Pastor Zhang on Jan. 15 and described some of the obstacles he and other lawyers had encountered in trying to meet with him since his arrest.

Pastor Zhang, 48, belongs to the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). On Nov. 15, several church members were detained after petitioning a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church. On Nov. 16, police forcibly detained Pastor Zhang without any formal documentation. Zhang's sisters and other church members were also detained. Several others were summoned to government offices. Over 20 church members were detained.

According to reports from China Aid, nine church members remain in detention and three more are missing after being taken into police custody. One detainee, Yang Miling, was reportedly beaten while in detention and subsequently attempted to commit suicide. Her 17-year-old son was stopped and beaten when he tried to visit his mother in hospital.

There are unconfirmed reports that six of those detained in detention centers will be sentenced before the Chinese New Year. Lawyers Liu Weiguo and Xia Jun told AsiaNews Pastor Zhang's own trial will take place soon.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), said, "We welcome the news that Pastor Zhang's lawyer has been able to meet with him at last. At the same time, we are extremely concerned that lawyers had to persist for two full months before the meeting was allowed. Furthermore, the majority of detainees have not been allowed any visit from their lawyers, and several other church members remain missing after being taken into police custody. CSW calls on the Chinese authorities to allow all the lawyers full access to their clients. We also urge the relevant authorities to urgently review the necessity of their detention and to ensure none of the detainees is subjected to beatings and other violations of their rights in accordance with the National Human Rights Action Plan of China, 2012-2015 (Section II: 2)."