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CHINA | TRIAL POSTPONED FOR PROTESTANT PASTOR

Christian Worldwide Solidarity (CSW) has learned the trial date for detained Protestant Pastor Zhang Shaojie, originally scheduled for Jan. 28, has been rescheduled for Feb. 12.

According to unconfirmed reports, the court notice stated the reason for the postponement was Pastor Zhang decided to have a new lawyer. This may refer to Zhang's second lawyer, Zhao Yonglin, who submitted his credentials later than lawyer Liu Weiguo.

On Jan. 21, lawyer Liu Weiguo received a notice from the Nanle's People's Court stating Pastor Zhang's trial was due to take place on Jan. 28. On the same day, he received notice of a pre-trial consultation between the lawyer, the defendant and the court, set for Jan. 23. China Aid reports that Pastor Zhang decided to boycott the meeting on the grounds that the required period of notice for such a meeting is three days. The short notice would have meant his lawyer could not attend.

Pastor Zhang, 49, 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, and several others were summoned to government offices. Over 20 church members were detained. According to reports from China Aid, as of Jan. 15, nine church members remain in detention, and three more are missing after being taken into police custody.

Some church members believe Zhang was detained as part of a plan by the authorities to replace him as the head of the local TSPM because of his defense of marginalized social groups. Zhang Shaojie has been charged with "fraud" and "disturbing public order".

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of CSW, said, "The case of the Nanle Church detainees has been marred by numerous irregularities and human rights violations, including the harassment of the detainees' lawyers, physical attacks on visiting Christians, lack of information about detainees' whereabouts, and alleged torture in detention. CSW and other organizations have made representations to governments and UN agencies to request an investigation into the handling of this case. We further call on the Chinese authorities to ensure that this trial is conducted in accordance with Chinese law and the standards set out in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which China is a signatory."