



2.25.14

CHINA | Henan Pastor's Trial Date Postponed Indefinitely

Chinese Pastor Zhang Shaojie's trial date, which had been set for Feb. 21, has been 'indefinitely postponed', according to lawyers quoted by China Aid.

The pastor's trial date was previously moved from Jan. 28 to Feb. 12, and then Feb. 21. Zhang's lawyer Liu Weiguo was notified of the most recent postponement by text message just three days before the scheduled date. No reason was given for the postponement. Some church members believe the delay may be connected in some way to China's upcoming National Political Consultative Conference and the National People's Congress. Others believe the court authorities are awaiting orders from their superiors.

Pastor Zhang Shaojie, 49, belongs to the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement. He was detained on Nov. 16, 2013, and has since been charged with "fraud" and "disturbing public order". On Nov. 15, 2013, several other Nanle church members were detained after petitioning a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church. Other church members were detained in November and December in connection with the case. In total, over 20 church members were detained. At the time of writing, nine remain in some form of detention.

On Feb. 13, the Henan provincial authorities announced the immediate closure of all extralegal centers, commonly known as a form of "black jail", used to hold petitioners intercepted in Beijing. Shortly after, China Aid reported a black jail in Henan where three of the detained church members had been held had been closed on Feb. 16. At the time of the transfer, the detainees' relatives had no information and were worried about their safety. One detainee, Zhao Guoli, has since been able to meet with his lawyer for the first time since his detention.

The lawyers representing the detainees have issued an urgent statement detailing the obstacles faced by lawyers working this case, which have made it almost impossible to perform their duties as legal representatives of the detained. On Dec. 12, 2013, the lawyers submitted an official complaint and investigation request to the Puyang Municipal People's Procuratorate, accusing two officials of illegally depriving citizens of their freedom of religion and of abuse of power.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "The repeated postponement of Pastor Zhang's trial, without consulting the lawyers or providing an explanation for the delay, is of great inconvenience to his lawyers and family members. In addition, the sudden transfer of three detainees, without notifying their families, serves to underscore the lack of transparency and accountability which has characterized this case to date. We urge the

authorities to respond urgently to the lawyers' request for an investigation into the possible abuse of power by officials handling this case.”