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CHINA | Pastor Zhang Shaojie's Trial Suspended Indefinitely

The trial of Chinese Pastor Zhang Shaojie began April 10 in Nanle County, Henan Province, but court proceedings were later suspended indefinitely, according to reports by China Aid, after Zhang's lawyers were detained, and he had to dismiss them from his case.

According to a statement issued by Zhang's family April 11, the decision to dismiss the lawyers was taken following concerns they were at risk of losing their licenses. Nanle County was subject to a heavy police presence on the day of the trial. Only two members of Zhang's family were permitted to attend, and a US Embassy official was reportedly barred from the courtroom. China Aid also reported that on April 9, Zhang's daughter, Zhang Huixin, was taken to Nanle County Public Security Bureau for "interrogation" along with her one year-old daughter and mother, Zhang's wife.

Zhang Shaojie is charged with "fraud" and "disturbing public order". The pastor, who belongs to the Nanle County Christian Church under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), was detained on Nov. 16, 2013 without any formal documentation after church members petitioned a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church. Over 20 church members were also detained. As of Jan. 15, China Aid reported that nine church members remained in detention and three more were missing after being taken into police custody.

During court proceedings, Lawyer Xia Jun questioned witness statements against Pastor Zhang, alleging the statement of at least one witness was taken under duress and raised concerns about the rule of law.

In another case raising concerns about rule of law and freedom of religion or belief, lawyers Jiang Tianyong, Tang Jitian, Wang Cheng and Zhang Junjie issued a declaration accusing the authorities of illegal detention and torture. Christian Solidarity Worldwide previously reported the lawyers' detention on March 21, along with "many other citizens", following an attempt to visit Qinglongshan Farm in Heilongjiang, believed to be an illegal detention center or black jail holding a variety of people, including unregistered church Christians. Zhang Junjie was released after five days. The other three lawyers were released on April 6 after serving 15-day administrative sentences. Upon their release, Jiang Tianyong and Wang Cheng have both been closely watched and harassed by police, and Wang's child was reportedly threatened with a ban from attending school in Zhejiang.

An English translation of the declaration by China Aid, dated April 13, states the four lawyers were illegally detained by officials from the Jiansanjiang Agricultural Reclamation Public Security Bureau, who behaved "like kidnappers", and the lawyers were beaten while in detention in order to force them to drop their lawsuit on behalf of victims of illegal detention on

Qinglongshan Farm. The declaration also notes many other lawyers and citizens were harassed, beaten and detained by the police after appealing for their release. The lawyers demand the authorities “immediately investigate and ban” centers like the legal education center in Heilongjiang, which they claim have replaced the abolished re-education through labor (RTL) camps.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “The detention and trial of Pastor Zhang Shaojie raises serious questions about police and officials’ commitment to rule of law in China. We encourage the relevant authorities to carefully investigate the lawyers’ claims that the procuratorate is in violation of Chinese law. We also urge the authorities to investigate the illegal detention of Lawyers Jiang Tianyong, Tang Jitian, Wang Cheng and Zhang Junjie and their allegations of torture and ill-treatment, as well as secure the release of others illegally detained in Heilongjiang.”