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CHINA | New Trial Date for Pastor, Church Still Blocked

A new date of April 29 was set for the trial of Chinese Pastor Zhang Shaojie, who is accused of fraud and “gathering a crowd to disrupt public order”.

The trial began on April 10 in Nanle County, Henan Province, but court proceedings were later suspended after Zhang’s lawyers were detained. Pastor Zhang, who has been in detention since November 16, 2013, had no option but to dismiss his two lawyers when it appeared they were at risk of losing their licenses. He has since hired lawyers Li Dunyong and Zhang Xinyun, according to reports from China Aid, but concerns about the authenticity of witnesses’ testimonies remain.

Zhang Shaojie is the pastor of Nanle County Christian Church, under the state-sanctioned Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). He and over 20 others were detained between November and December 2013 after church members petitioned a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church. Including Pastor Zhang, nine church members remain in detention.

Nanle County Christian Church has been under surveillance since Pastor Zhang’s detention in November. Visitors from other provinces have been stopped en route and turned back, and even now church members are prevented from entering the building for services.

Despite operating in a legal grey area, unregistered churches in some urban parts of China such as Beijing and Shanghai are increasingly able to meet without significant restrictions, and in greater numbers, than in previous decades. However, under the new regime, there are fears that partial improvements in the situation for unregistered churches may be reversed as the regime cracks down on any perceived threats to its authority.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “From the beginning, the Nanle Church case has been marred by numerous irregularities both before and during Pastor Zhang’s trial. We hope that this will be a turning point in terms of the authorities’ handling of the case. We 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, which China signed in 1998.”