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CHINA | Calls Grow for Release of Detained Lawyers

Lawyers, journalists and human rights defenders based in South Asia issued a joint statement expressing concern about the detention and disappearance of over 270 lawyers, activists and family members and associates in China since July 10.

One of the most recent and alarming arrests is that of lawyer Zhang Kai, who was taken into custody by police for a second time on Aug. 25 and later sentenced to six months imprisonment in an undisclosed location.

Lawyers and activists from 24 provinces and municipalities across China were arrested, detained or forcibly disappeared. While most have been released, 28 remain in some form of detention.

The joint statement issued by lawyers from the Saakshi network and members of civil society from Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka calls for the release of those detained without charge and affirms that "lawyers, including rights defense lawyers, play a vital role in building a society founded on rule of law." It follows statements of concern by United Nations human rights experts, the European Union, UK, U.S. and other voices from the international community.

The authors note "with grave concern that the Chinese authorities have searched and confiscated material from at least three lawyers' offices, and that the state media have branded the detained lawyers as 'criminals,' prior to trial, and even before formal arrest. It is also noteworthy that many of the lawyers detained, questioned and disappeared have worked on 'sensitive' cases, defending the rights to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, and representing and supporting other human rights defenders."

Lawyer Zhang Kai defended Pastor Huang Yizi, who served a one-year sentence after protesting the removal of crosses and demolition of churches in Zhejiang Province. Zhang also helped form a lawyers group to protect church crosses and offered advice to numerous churches facing the removal of their cross. On Aug. 31, China Aid reported that Zhang Kai was sentenced to six months' imprisonment in an undisclosed location for "endangering national security" and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order." Since these charges relate to national security, Zhang has not been granted access to legal representation. His imprisonment as an "undisclosed location" suggests that he will be held at an extra-legal facility, or "black jail," where there is an increased risk of ill-treatment and torture.

Andy Dipper, Chief Operating Officer of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We welcome this statement from lawyers, journalists and activists in South Asia in solidarity with the legal rights defense community in China. As the statement notes, rule of law is essential for the protection of human rights, and rights lawyers play a crucial role in building rule of law. We call on the

Chinese government to release immediately all those held without charge. In particular, we express our deep concern about the whereabouts and well-being of lawyer Zhang Kai. Available information suggests that the charges against Zhang are spurious and are aimed at preventing him advocating on behalf of churches and individuals affected by the cross removals in Zhejiang Province. We call on the Chinese government to review urgently the case of lawyer Zhang Kai, and to allow him access to legal representation.”