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CHINA | Human Rights Lawyers Arrested Following Crackdown

At least six Chinese human rights lawyers and their colleagues were formally arrested on suspicion of charges relating to “subversion of state power,” six months after a crackdown on over 300 lawyers, activists, associates and family members.

The six include several employees of Fengrui law firm in Beijing. Employees of the firm were among the first to be detained in what has been dubbed the “709 crackdown” (referring to July 9, when the first lawyer, Wang Yu, disappeared).

Legal assistant Zhao Wei was also formally arrested on suspicion of subversion-related crimes. Zhao is the assistant of rights lawyer Li Heping, a Christian lawyer who has defended Christians, Falun Gong practitioners and other rights defense lawyers. Li is also in detention. The authorities have rejected requests for meetings from Zhao’s family and lawyers.

Hundreds more lawyers and activists, as well as relatives and associates, were interrogated, detained, imprisoned and disappeared between July and December 2015. Among them were many who have defended the right to freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, including lawyer Zhang Kai, who previously defended Protestant pastor Huang Yizi in Zhejiang, and lawyer Li Fangping, who defended the activist-lawyer Chen Guangcheng and Uighur academic Ilham Tohti. Although most of the detainees have since been released, over 30 remain in some form of detention.

On Jan. 9, the six-month anniversary of the beginning of the crackdown, a statement signed by 108 civil society organizations, including Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), called for the release of the lawyers and related individuals still detained in China. The statement also calls on the authorities to immediately disclose the whereabouts of the detained lawyers and human rights defenders, and ensure that their psychological and physical well-being and safety are protected. The authors also note that 2015 was a year of “exceptional challenges” for

civil society in China, including members of religious and socially disadvantaged groups, who were “seized and/or detained in unprecedented scale.”

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are extremely concerned to hear that at least six lawyers and legal assistants are facing such serious charges. These individuals are among over 300 lawyers, human rights and religious freedom defenders, and their relatives and colleagues, who have been interrogated, detained, defamed, harassed, and placed under travel restrictions. In the most serious cases they have been forcibly disappeared and held incommunicado for up to six months. We join over 100 civil society organizations worldwide in condemning the use of such measures as well as the “collective punishment” of families and friends of prominent lawyers, and the use of the media to attack the reputation of lawyers yet to face trial. We call on the Chinese government to uphold rule of law, release those illegally detained, and to protect the rights of lawyers to practice in accordance with domestic and international law.”