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CHINA | Lawyer “Confesses” to Breaking Law

According to Chinese state media reports, rights lawyer Zhang Kai, who has been detained since Aug. 25, gave a televised “confession” admitting to “disturbing social order,” “endangering state security,” and behaving in an unprofessional manner. It is not clear whether he was formally arrested.

The charges levelled against Zhang Kai included “disturbing social order,” stealing and spying. During six months detention termed “residential surveillance at a designated location,” Zhang had no contact with his family or lawyer. On Jan. 28, the authorities informed Zhang’s family he had written a note dismissing his lawyer.

Zhang is a prominent human rights lawyer and a Christian. Although based in Beijing, prior to his arrest he was living in Zhejiang Province, where he organized a team of over 30 legal professionals to defend churches facing the forced removal of their crosses or the demolition of their buildings.

Authorities have removed hundreds of crosses from both Catholic and Protestant registered and unregistered churches in the province since early 2014 with some observers estimating the total number to be over 1,500. Zhang provided legal advice to churches and church leaders in Zhejiang. In August, Zhang was due to meet with the US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, David Saperstein, during the Ambassador’s visit to China, but he was detained before the visit.

Zhang is among over 300 lawyers and activists, as well as relatives and associates, who were interrogated, detained, imprisoned and disappeared in a crackdown beginning in July. Most were released, but at least 19 were formally arrested and nine others remain in some form of detention and/or are being held incommunicado. Zhang’s televised confession follows similar public admissions of guilt by Hong Kong-based bookseller Gui Minhai, Swedish human rights activist Peter Dahlin, and journalist Gao Yu. Activists believe TV confessions are often the result of coercion.

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, “This alleged “confession” by lawyer Zhang Kai is another concerning development in the ongoing crackdown against those who seek to peacefully uphold human rights and rule of law in China. Zhang Kai has been held incommunicado for six months without access to a lawyer or any contact with the outside world. Suddenly he has appeared on state media confessing to deceiving churches and Christians. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which China has signed, states that everyone has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty. Lawyer Zhang Kai has not even been formally arrested but he has already been presented as guilty on state television. He has a right to a fair and public hearing, and legal counsel of his own choosing. We call on the Chinese government to review urgently the case of lawyer Zhang Kai, to allow him access to legal representation and to release all lawyers, activists and others arbitrarily detained in connection with their peaceful defense of freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.”