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CHINA | Sentences Handed Down Following Crackdown

The first sentences were handed down to lawyers and activists arrested as part of the “709 crackdown” on China’s community of human rights lawyers and activists, their associates and family members.

On Aug. 4, Zhou Shifeng, founder of high-profile firm Fengrui, was sentenced to seven years in prison for subversion, according to news reports.

Two other activists were also convicted and sentenced on the same charge this week. Chinese activist Hu Shigen, a Christian from an unregistered church, was reportedly sentenced to more than seven years in prison Aug. 3. On Aug. 2, lawyer Zhai Yanmin reportedly received a three-year suspended jail sentence after being convicted of subversion. Zhai Yanmin is known for his political activism in the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989.

On Aug. 1, lawyer Wang Yu, also from Fengrui law firm, was released on a bail following a televised “confession” in which she appeared to renounce her human rights work and criticize Zhou Shifeng. She was the first lawyer arrested July 9, 2015, the date which gave rise to the phrase “709 crackdown.”

Following her arrest, fellow lawyers signed an open letter supporting her, which is believed to be the pretext to the unprecedented crackdown on the legal community in which over 300 lawyers, their colleagues and families have been arrested, interrogated or disappeared at some point over the course of the year.

Many have now been released from prison, but over 20 remain in detention and incommunicado. On July 4, some prisoners’ wives protested outside the detention center, demanding to see their husbands. Seven lawyers’ wives also issued a joint statement calling for the release of all the detainees, for the monitoring and harassment of their families to stop, and for the rights of the detainees and their families to be respected.

The conditions of Wang Yu’s bail are not yet fully clear. Also on bail with unknown conditions is Zhao Wei, a 24 year-old legal assistant at Fengrui, who was arrested during the crackdown and released on bail July 7. Lawyer Zhang Kai, a Christian who worked on religious freedom cases, was released March 23. He is reportedly at home in Inner Mongolia following a televised

“confession” which activists believe was made under duress. The conditions of his release are also unclear. Lawyer Li Heping, another Christian who worked on religious freedom cases, was arrested July 10 and has not been seen since.

CSW’s Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, “We are dismayed by the serious charges being leveled at these lawyers and activists, who have committed no crime and have sought only to uphold the rights of their fellow citizens. Many of them are still detained; and as in the case of Li Heping, their whereabouts unknown. We are gravely concerned about these detentions, the charges faced by those who have been tried in court and the unclear status of those who are out on bail. We urge the Chinese government to respect the rule of law and cease its harassment of the human rights legal community, allowing them to exercise the rights and freedoms guaranteed under international and Chinese law and to advocate for their fellow citizens.”