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CHINA | Prisoner of Conscience Peng Ming Dies in Prison

Peng Ming, a long-term political prisoner, died in prison in Hubei, China, and doubts have been cast over the lack of official information concerning his death.

Peng Ming died in prison Nov. 29 while serving a life sentence for engaging in “terrorist activities.” However, in November 2005, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention had adopted an Opinion that Peng’s detention was arbitrary.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Peng, a Christian, established organizations and publications advocating for development and democratic reform. After 18 months’ detention in 1999-2000, he fled to Thailand and then to the United States, where he continued his work. In May 2004, Peng travelled to Thailand to visit his parents and crossed into Burma, from where he was illegally transported to China. He was sentenced to life imprisonment in 2005.

Peng’s brother Peng Zhangming told Radio Free Asia (RFA) that the death certificate gave no details of the cause of death. However, according to the news and commentary website China Change, many in the dissident community inside and outside China have “expressed doubt over the official version of events, particularly given the fact that Peng’s older brother visited him as recently as November 24, and reported that he appeared to be in good health.”

In a separate development, well-known human rights lawyer Jiang Tianyong has been missing since Nov. 21. Jiang is a leading member of the China Human Rights Lawyers Group and has worked on a variety of rights-related cases, including representing religion or belief communities. He also worked on the high profile cases of activists Chen Guangcheng and Gao Zhisheng. His lawyers’ license was revoked in 2009 by the Beijing authorities, but Jiang continued to provide legal advice to victims of human rights abuses. As a result, he has been repeatedly harassed, detained and beaten.

On Nov. 21, Jiang went missing on his way home to Beijing after visiting the wife of detained human rights lawyer Xie Yang in Hunan. He has not been seen since. On Nov. 23, a relative reported Jiang's disappearance to the Public Security Bureau, but officials refused to take up the case because "it was unclear where he was last seen." Human rights groups have expressed fears that he has been forcibly disappeared and is at risk of torture.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "These two cases, although from two different times, demonstrate the vulnerability of anyone in China who speaks out for democracy and human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. Peng Ming's death, after more than ten years' detention and separation from his family in the US, is a tragedy. We urge the authorities to make clear the reasons for his death, and to investigate any possibility of ill-treatment. We further urge the Chinese authorities to investigate immediately and impartially the disappearance of Jiang Tianyong, and, if he is detained, to guarantee his right to protection from torture and other ill-treatment, a fair trial, and access to his family, a lawyer of his choice and adequate medical care."