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Dissident's wife pleas for China to let him leave

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Chinese lawyer missing for more than a year said she was relieved to learn he is alive and appealed Monday to the government to allow him to leave China and join his family in the United States.

Attorney Gao Zhisheng resurfaced suddenly Sunday, saying he is now living in northern China, but it was not clear under what conditions. A human rights group said he is most likely living under tight surveillance by Chinese security forces.

Before being jailed and otherwise muzzled four years ago, Gao was the most dauntless of a new group of civil liberties lawyers. He took on sensitive cases involving underground Christians and the banned Falun Gong spiritual group and advocated constitutional reform.

Since he went missing on Feb. 4, 2009, from his hometown in central China, the government has given vague explanations about Gao's whereabouts, heightening worries he had been jailed or tortured as he was previously.

The United States and the European Union have called on China to investigate his disappearance.

"I am tremendously relieved that my husband is alive," Gao's wife, Geng He, said in a statement issued by Freedom Now, a non-governmental organization that represents prisoners of conscience.

Geng and her two children fled China a month before Gao was detained and now live in the United States.

"I am so happy that my children were able to speak to him," she said. "My children and I have not seen their father since January 2009. We urge the Chinese government to allow Zhisheng to leave the country and be reunited with us in the United States."

Freedom Now said Gao should be allowed to travel to the U.S. for medical treatment and to be reunited with his family.

Contacted briefly Sunday on his cell phone, Gao said he is living in Wutai Shan, a mountain range famous as a Buddhist retreat, and that he is "free at present."

"I just want to be in peace and quiet for a while and be reunited with my family," Gao told The Associated Press. "Most people belong with family. I have not been with mine for a long time. This is a mistake and I want to correct this mistake."

Gao declined to answer further questions, saying he was not allowed by law, nor was he willing, to accept media interviews. Bans on interviews are often a condition of parole in China.

Li Heping, a Beijing-based human rights lawyer and friend of Gao's, said he also spoke briefly with Gao on his cell phone and believed Gao was being followed by authorities.

"I believe he does not have freedom," Li said. "First, when we were speaking, he sounded like he wanted to hang up. He told me that he had friends around him. I'm sure that the people around him are limiting what he can say."

"Secondly, he would not tell me exactly where he is when I suggested visiting him," Li said. "We are very concerned about his situation."

The Freedom Now statement said: "It is assumed that he is under close surveillance, if not de facto house arrest."

In a statement made public just before he disappeared last year, Gao described severe beatings from Chinese security forces, electric shocks to his genitals, and cigarettes held to his eyes during a 2007 detention.

Gao was arrested in August 2006, convicted at a one-day trial and placed under house arrest. State media at the time said he was accused of subversion on the basis of nine articles posted on foreign Web sites.

Since his disappearance, authorities have been vague about his case. A policeman told Gao's brother that the lawyer "went missing," and a Foreign Ministry official said earlier this year that the self-taught lawyer "is where he should be." Chinese state-run media have not mentioned the case.

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Associated Press reporter Gillian Wong contributed to this story.