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A Chinese Dissident's Mysterious Reappearance

By Austin Ramzy / Beijing

After disappearing more than a year ago, a Chinese human-rights lawyer re-emerged this past weekend, to the relief of family members who had feared for his safety. Gao Zhisheng received several phone calls from colleagues in Beijing, and spoke briefly by phone with his children, who fled to the U.S. last year with their mother Geng He.

"I am tremendously relieved that my husband is alive," said Geng, according to a statement released by Freedom Now, a Washington-based NGO that advocates for political prisoners. "I am so happy that my children were able to speak to him." Geng said that she hoped her husband would be allowed to go to the U.S., where she and her two children were granted political asylum in 2009.

"This is a new and interesting twist in a long, bizarre and extremely worrying saga," says Phelim Kine, an Asia researcher with New York City-based Human Rights Watch. Gao says he is now living on Wutai Mountain, the site of several dozen monasteries in China's central Shanxi province. But little more is known about whether he remains under some sort of detention or house arrest. "I talked to him on the phone for about two or three minutes," says Li Fangping, a lawyer in Beijing. "He wanted to hang up when we only talked for one or two minutes. He said his 'friends' were looking for him. He had to go. When asked about how he was and whether he was free, he said he was not bad, and he is free right now. But I'm not sure."

A self-taught attorney who was named one of China's top 10 lawyers by the Ministry of Justice in 2001, Gao specialized in politically sensitive cases. He fell afoul of China's leaders for his work on the behalf of practitioners of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, and in 2005 he wrote an open letter to President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao decrying the brutal treatment of Falun Gong followers at the hands of police. He was given a suspended three-year sentence for subversion in 2006, and then detained by state security officers a year later. They tortured him severely, which he detailed in a letter after his release, and threatened to kill him if he ever spoke about what happened.

Given that history, human-rights advocates were greatly concerned for Gao's safety following his arrest by Beijing police on Feb. 4, 2009. Chinese officials offered up a number of incomplete

explanations of Gao's fate. He had gone missing while out on a walk, a police officer told Gao's brother. On Jan. 21 Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu said Gao was "where he should be," then later said he didn't know where exactly that was. During a joint press conference with U.K. Foreign Secretary David Miliband on March 16, Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi said Gao had been convicted and sentenced for subversion and that he had not been tortured. But it was unclear if Yang was referring to Gao's 2006 conviction or a new case.

The Dui Hua Foundation, a U.S.-based human-rights group, reported that Chinese officials had said Gao was working in China's far western Xinjiang region. Gao told another lawyer, Teng Biao, during a brief phone conversation on Sunday that he had indeed been in the Xinjiang capital of Urumqi. "He said that he had been free for six months. But if that was true, why hasn't he contacted anyone, including his family, since then? I find that suspicious," says Teng.

Gao's disappearance last year provoked high-level concerns, and U.S. and European diplomats raised his case with Chinese authorities. Earlier this month an international legal team filed a petition on Gao's behalf with the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. While his supporters applaud the latest news of his condition, they say far too much is still unknown.

"Where is he? Under what kind of circumstances is he? Is he in jail? Is he in prison? Is he under some sort of house arrest?" asks Kine, the human-rights researcher. "It is a relief to learn that Gao Zhisheng appears to be alive and healthy enough to talk on the phone. But the mystery of Gao Zhisheng remains. The Chinese government has yet to produce him."

Those question may be unanswered for some time. On Monday the mobile phone that Gao had briefly been answering over the weekend went dead, again severing his contact with the outside world.

— *With reporting by Chengcheng Jiang and Jessie Jiang / Beijing*