

## **Demanding Justice for Gao Zhisheng**

*A prominent legal activist has disappeared into the Chinese security system again.*

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By Jared Genser

Gao Zhisheng, one of China's most prominent and courageous human-rights lawyers and prisoners of conscience, has again disappeared into the bowels of the Chinese state's security system. For more than a year, his family has desperately tried to access him in Shayu prison in Xinjiang, a remote province in western China. But all these efforts have been rebuffed and no one has seen or heard from him since January 2013. In response to Mr. Gao's most recent disappearance, his wife on Thursday in Geneva filed a complaint to the United Nations, urging it to conduct an investigation into his whereabouts.

A self-taught advocate and legal rights defender, Mr. Gao was once recognized among the country's top 10 lawyers by China's Ministry of Justice. Yet his advocacy for the country's most vulnerable, including factory workers, coal miners, victims of land seizures, and persecuted Christians and Falun Gong practitioners, led the authorities to target Mr. Gao and his family with threats and intimidation starting in 2005. He has been in and out of prisons and subject to disappearances and torture for nearly a decade.

Officials closed his law firm, disbarred him and placed his wife, Geng He, and their young children under 24-hour surveillance. Police stationed inside the family's home repeatedly harassed them. In school, the children were taunted and put under constant watch by the police—even when using the restroom. Because of this unbearable treatment, Geng He and her children fled China and have since been granted asylum in the United States.

Mr. Gao's family is safe now, but he remains in danger. In 2006, he made a coerced confession to "inciting subversion" and was given a suspended three-year prison term. In 2007, Chinese officials tortured him by shocking him with electric batons, holding lit cigarettes up to his eyes, and piercing his genitals with toothpicks. On other occasions, they put him in restraints and beat him repeatedly with handguns. In 2009 and 2010, police disappeared Mr. Gao and tortured him further.

In December 2011, just before the expiration of his suspended sentence and after 20 months of having been held in unknown locations, the Xinhua news agency announced that Mr. Gao would be imprisoned for the remainder of his original sentence. Since then, family members have been allowed to visit him only twice for half an hour on each occasion. Although scheduled for release on Aug. 22, he has now disappeared once again, leaving his family with renewed and urgent questions about his health and safety.

Mr. Gao's imprisonment, torture and disappearances have brought tremendous suffering to him and his family. In testifying recently before the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Mr. Gao's daughter Grace reflected on her family's insurmountable pain and loneliness. "I believe that when we speak out for my father . . . we protect our own freedom and values," she said.

Despite Mr. Gao's latest disappearance, it is hoped he is managing to endure. But hope must be accompanied by action and it is more urgent than ever that China not be allowed to disappear Gao Zhisheng again with impunity.

On Thursday, his wife lodged a complaint with the U.N. Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, a body of the Human Rights Council. The submission notes that Mr. Gao's family is "distraught because they have no idea whether he is even alive." It goes on to emphasize the Chinese government is violating its own laws allowing for regular family visits, written correspondence, and access to counsel.

Ms. Geng hopes the Working Group will urge the Chinese government to conduct an investigation into Mr. Gao's disappearance. Although the process itself can take many months, the Working Group has a good history of receiving specific replies from the Chinese government to its concerns. In addition, merely by highlighting Mr. Gao's disappearance publicly and triggering a U.N. inquiry, his family has put intense pressure on the Chinese government to respond. While this alone is a helpful step forward, much more needs to be done.

The international community, including the United States and United Nations, must demand proof from the Chinese government that Mr. Gao is alive and insist that his family be granted monthly access to him as is required by Chinese law. The world must urge Mr. Gao's immediate and unconditional release.

At a minimum, foreign leaders should press Beijing to release Mr. Gao on time instead of finding renewed excuses to extend his detention, as it has done in other cases. Washington must also exert pressure on the Chinese government to confirm that Mr. Gao will be provided a Chinese passport and the ability to travel to America upon his release.

It is time to reunite Gao Zhisheng with his family. He and his loved ones have suffered long enough.

*Mr. Genser is the founder of Freedom Now, an advocacy organization that serves as international pro bono counsel to Gao Zhisheng, Liu Xiaobo and their families.*