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Chinese authorities keep tight grip on former prisoners of conscience

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Instead of freeing prisoners of conscience when they complete a jail sentence, the Chinese authorities have for the past few months been using their supposed release to mask the fact that they have been placed under house arrest, or subjected to some other curtailment of their freedom or, worse still, forced disappearance.

They seem determined to never fully release such detainees, doing everything in their power to keep them isolated from their families and the rest of society by cutting off their means of communication or restricting their movements. They are also confining writers, lawyers, dissidents and human rights activists in a similar manner, blocking their phone lines and Internet connections in order to cut them off from the outside world.

Reporters Without Borders firmly condemns such behaviour, which violates the right to justice and imposes a life sentence on every former prisoner.

The press freedom organization is today releasing on report on the various iniquitous methods used by China's "justice" system to achieve these ends. China is on the Reporters Without Borders list of Enemies of the Internet and is ranked 171st out of 178 countries in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

Suspect release

The government seems to have negotiated the release of jailed online activist Zhao Lianhai last December in return for a public apology followed by silence, in order to encourage other dissidents to censor themselves.

Zhao announced his release in his blog on 28 December, saying he was being treated in a hospital and did not want to be contacted. Completely contradicting his previous statements, he apologized to the authorities. "I support, acknowledge and thank the government, and express deep regret for my previous extreme opinions towards the government," he wrote. He and his wife's mobile phones were disconnected and his lawyer, Li Fangping, told Agence France-Presse he was unable to confirm whether he had been released.

Journalists who had tried to confirm the rumours of his release were prevented from approaching his home on 10 December and some of them were physically attacked.

Zhao was arrested in November 2009 for creating and running a website about the tainted milk powder sold by the Chinese company Sanlu and was given a 30-month jail sentence a year later. After initially going on hunger strike and announcing his intention to appeal, he told his lawyers he

wanted no more contact with them and would not after all appeal against his conviction.

This led human rights groups to suspect that he had reached an agreement with the authorities under which he would be granted a parole, possibly on medical grounds.

Release followed by intimidation

Prisoners of conscience often continue to be threatened and harassed after being “freed.” He Depu, a member of the outlawed China Democracy Party and author of many online essays, is a case in point. He was given a bad beating by police officers when he was released on 23 January. Arrested in November 2002, he had been sentenced to eight years in prison by a Beijing court at the end of a sham two-hour trial on 6 November 2002.

Other activists, journalists and Internet users have found themselves isolated when their means of communication were cut off. The activists Fan Yafeng, Ai Weiwei and Wu Gan, the writer Xia Shang and the blogger Woerther all found that their mobile phone lines or Internet access had been disconnected or drastically restricted.

A brief arrest followed by isolation is a new form of psychological harassment now in use. One example is human rights lawyer Mo Shaoping, who was arrested at his office on 10 December. He was freed the next day and, the day after that, his mobile phone was cut off without explanation. Zhang Zuhua, an activist who signed Charter 08, found that both his Internet access and his mobile phone were disconnected after he was arrested in the street in December.

By preventing any communication with the rest of society and especially with their friends and family members and other government opponents, the authorities hope to maintain dissidents under their control and restrict the flow of information.

House arrest

Another way of controlling supposedly released dissidents is house arrest. A secretly-made video recently exposed the conditions in which journalists, activists and netizens are kept under house arrest and the methods of surveillance used.

It was filmed by Chen Guangcheng (陳光誠), a well known human rights lawyer who, according to the authorities, had been freed on completing a jail sentence on 8 September 2010.

Posted online by the US-based human rights group China Aid Association, Chen’s video shows how he is being kept under 24-hour surveillance by around 60 people in his village in a rural part of the eastern province of Shandong. Chen describes the “thuggish methods” used to monitor them. At one point his wife, Yuan Weijing, says: “To block their view, I piled up corn cobs against the window but they set up a step ladder to observe us from the top.”

In the video, Chen says the authorities have told everyone in the village he is a “traitor and counterrevolutionary,” they have installed security cameras throughout the surrounding area and they have blocked phone connections. Summarizing what seems to be the new Communist Party policy for dealing with dissidents, the former Nobel Peace Prize nominee says: “I have come out of a small jail and walked into a bigger jail.”

Arrested on 21 June 2006 for investigating allegations of forced abortions and sterilization, Chen was sentenced in August of the same year to four years and three months in prison. Although blind, he was beaten and deprived of food while held, and was made to serve the entire jail term. The video was the first word from him in the five months since his “release.”

Liu Xia, the wife of jailed Nobel peace laureate Liu Xiaobo, has been under house arrest since 8 October 2010, the day the Nobel Committee announced that it was awarding him the prize. When she managed to connect to the Internet for a few minutes on 17 February, she told a friend that she felt “miserable,” that the family was being held “hostage” and that “no one can help us.” She is being kept in complete isolation, without any contact with the outside world. She was last able to visit her husband in prison in October 2010. The conditions in which he is serving his 11-year jail sentence are unacceptable.

The Chinese authorities sometimes adopt a public relations strategy with former political prisoners that is very hard to understand.

Five photos showing the Mongolian journalist and human rights activist Hada with his wife Xinna and son Uiles, under the caption “Family reunion,” were posted anonymously on the website Boxun on 11 December 2010, at a time when the rest of Hada’s family were without any news of them. Hada was supposed to have been released the previous day from a prison in Inner Mongolia on completing a 15-year sentence, but the authorities had said nothing about either him or Xinna and Uiles.

It is suspected that they were all placed under house arrest but the authorities just added to the doubts and confusion about their whereabouts.

An official identified simply as Jin said on 14 December that Hada, Xinna and Uiles were safe and were taking advantage of the family’s reunion in a “luxury five star hotel” which he refused to name. Without going into any detail, he also said Hada and his family needed “a bit of time and calm to prepare the next stages.” At the same time, it was reported that Hada’s uncle, Haschuluu, had received an SMS on 13 December from Xinna’s mobile phone that was written by Hada. It said: “I have been released. My son Uiles has been released too. All three of us are now together.”

After a blurred video supposedly showing Hada was posted online anonymously in January, Haschuluu said he had finally been allowed to meet with his nephew in a place under military surveillance. He said Hada was underfed and was without news of his wife and son, which contradicted the SMS Hada had supposedly sent to Haschuluu. Hada’s exact place of residence is still not known.

The New York-based Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Centre subsequently received a new video clearly showing Hada and his uncle walking towards the camera during a meeting apparently orchestrated by the authorities.

Finally, on 21 February, another video was posted on YouTube by Tianguodenver, a name previously used by the Chinese authorities to post content online. It shows a carefully staged interview with Hada, Xinna and Uiles in which it is clear that Hada’s health has deteriorated and Xinna nonetheless thanks the authorities for the humanitarian way they have treated the family. It is

still not known where they are residing.

Other journalists, netizens and activists who are supposed to be free and able to enjoy all their rights as citizens have also been harassed by the authorities and had their movements restricted. The activist Gu Chuan was briefly detained in December by officials who have previously told him not to leave home. The academic and activist Xu Zhiyong was being followed everywhere by six policemen in December. The same month, national security officials prevented the lawyer Li Xiongbing from attending a conference organized by the EU delegation in China.

Rushed release

In an attempt to protect its nonetheless already tarnished image, the government releases prisoners who are at death's door to avoid being blamed for their death although it denied them the treatment to which they had a right while detained. The case of Zhang Jianhong, a dissident journalist better known by the pen-name of Li Hong, highlighted such deceptive practices.

Li, the editor of Aiqinhai (www.aiqinhai.org), an online literary magazine that was closed by the authorities in 2006 for "content critical of the Chinese government," died in a hospital in Ningbo, in the eastern province of Zhejiang, on 31 December as a result of a disease that was not treated during his three years in prison. He died surrounded by police who were there to prevent visits from other dissidents.

Arrested in 2006 and sentenced to six years in prison in 2007 on a charge of subverting state authority, Li was hastily granted medical parole in June 2010 and was immediately taken to the hospital in Ningbo. This belated move came after requests for parole were refused in 2007 and 2008.

Li wrote many articles for his magazine, some of them in support of the now-missing human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng. He also wrote for the overseas Chinese news websites Boxun and Epoch Times. His death was undoubtedly hastened by the three years of detention in appalling conditions and without medical care, during which he was almost certainly mistreated.

Forced disappearance

Ailing dissidents also tend to "disappear" mysteriously when discharged from hospital.

This is the case with Govruud Huuchinhuu, a Mongolian human rights activist, writer and cyber-dissident. She has been missing since 27 January, when she was supposedly released from a hospital in Tongliao, in Inner Mongolia, where she was being treated for cancer. A member of the Southern Mongolian Democratic Alliance, she had been under house arrest since November for urging fellow Mongolian dissidents to get ready to welcome Hada's release.

Huuchinhuu wrote many essays criticizing the Chinese government's ethnic policies in Inner Mongolia. She was also active online and used to edit three websites – www.nutuge.com, www.ehoron.com and www.mongolger.net – which were closed by the authorities. As many as 20 policemen kept her home under surveillance while she was under house arrest.

When dissidents disappear, the authorities sometimes go so far as to refuse to register them as

missing persons. This is what happened with the famous human rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng.

Public Security Department officers arrested Gao at his home in Shaanxi on 4 February 2009. Thereafter, his family received no news of him until the following September, when the police told them he had “disappeared.” Amid mounting international pressure, he “reappeared” in March 2010, apparently released by the police after more than a year in detention.

He gave several interviews but, after being harassed by the police, he disappeared again less than a month later. The authorities maintain that they have no information about Gao and have refused to register him as a missing person.

Gao defended dispossessed landowners and members of religious minorities, including Christians, who had been harassed by the authorities. He and other activists such as Hu Jia staged a “rotating hunger strike for human rights” in 2006. US congressmen nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2008. His wife and two children fled China on 11 March 2009 and are now living in exile in the United States.