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CHINA | Death of Human Rights Lawyer Suspicious

Well-known Chinese Christian human rights lawyer, Li Baiguang, died in a military hospital Feb. 25, despite being in good health just days before. There are concerns the authorities were involved in his death.

Li died within hours of going to the hospital with a minor stomach complaint. The hospital reported that he died as a result of a liver problem. Friends and colleagues say Li was in good health and never mentioned a problem. In previous months, Li was repeatedly harassed and threatened by the Chinese authorities in connection with his defense of human rights.

Given his state of health before his death and the authorities' opposition to his work, local and international activists fear the authorities were involved in his death, pointing to the cases of Liu Xiaobo, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate who died in police custody in July 2017, and political prisoner Peng Ming, who died in prison in November 2016. Like Li, Peng was in good health when his brother visited him just days before. His death certificate gave no details of the cause of death.

Li Baiguang was a highly respected human rights lawyer who was well-known for his defense of victims of land grabs, religious communities, and other victims of human rights abuses. In 2008, Li received an annual democracy award from the National Endowment for Democracy. In 2013 he defended Zhang Cuijuan, one of the members of Nanle County Christian Church detained in November 2013 without formal documentation after church members attempted to petition a higher authority about a land dispute involving the church. Zhang's brother, the pastor of the church, was sentenced to 12 years in prison and fined approximately \$13,000 for fraud and "gathering a crowd to disturb public order."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "Lawyer Li Baiguang was a courageous defender of human rights, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. Time and again he was threatened, intimidated and harassed by the authorities, yet he remained committed to his work,

standing up for the rights of the most vulnerable in Chinese society. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Li and other Chinese human rights defenders, together with CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers, in Washington, DC recently. His death is a tragedy, the latest in a series of highly suspicious deaths of human rights defenders and dissidents. Each and every case is a shocking and tragic reminder of the price of speaking out for justice, democracy and universal human rights in China. We urgently call on the Chinese authorities to launch an immediate and impartial investigation into the death of Li Baiguang, to ensure that his family are not harassed or restricted in any way, and to cease all forms of violence and intimidation against human rights defenders in China.”