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CHINA | Lawyer Faces License Revocation

On Jan. 4, Ren Qiuanniu, the lawyer who defended Chinese human rights defender Zhang Zhan, received a letter from the Chinese authorities saying that his license to practice as a lawyer may be revoked. Zhang was sentenced to four years in prison on Dec. 28 on charges of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a charge commonly levelled at activists.

In early February 2020, Zhang, a Christian human rights defender and former lawyer, travelled to the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, from where she posted videos and articles about the virus outbreak on social media. She was detained in May 2020 and subsequently spent over seven months in detention, during which time her health has deteriorated. Her trial on Dec. 28 lasted only a few hours.

On Jan. 6, another lawyer was able to visit Zhang and reported that she has partially ended her hunger strike and is deciding whether to appeal before her appeal deadline, which is set for Jan. 11.

In response to the sentence, the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights tweeted: "We are deeply concerned by the 4-year prison sentence imposed on citizen journalist Zhang Zhan. We raised her case with the authorities throughout 2020 as an example of the excessive clampdown on freedom of expression linked to #COVID19 & continue to call for her release."

Other members of the international community raised similar concerns following the sentencing. The British Embassy in Beijing tweeted that the case "raises serious concerns about media freedom in China," noting that a British diplomat tried to attend the trial but was denied access. The US Department of State strongly condemned the "sham prosecution and conviction" of Zhang and called for her immediate and unconditional release, accusing the Chinese Communist Party of restricting and manipulating information about the outbreak. The EU also issued a statement on the case, reporting that according to credible sources, Zhang has been subject to torture

and ill-treatment in detention, adding that “it is crucial that she receives adequate medical assistance” and calling for her immediate release.

Zhang’s lawyer Ren Qiuanniu is an experienced human rights lawyer. In addition to working on Zhang’s case, he was also involved in the case of 12 Hong Kong activists arrested while trying to flee to Taiwan. Last week 10 of the activists were sentenced to between seven months and three years in prison, with two minors in the group returned to Hong Kong. Another lawyer working on the case, Lu Siwei, has also been told his license may be revoked.

The situation in Hong Kong continues to deteriorate rapidly. On Jan. 6, over 50 people, including activists, democrats, social workers and lawyers, were arrested and accused of violating the national security law.

CSW’s Founder President Mervyn Thomas said, “CSW continues to call for Zhang Zhan’s immediate and unconditional release. Her case is emblematic of the many lawyers, activists and journalists in China who continue to be targeted with spurious charges as a result of their work defending human rights. We call on the Chinese authorities to protect the rights of all those working on human rights in the country, ensuring that they are allowed to operate in a safe environment, and to do their important human rights work without persecution or harassment. We call on the international community to raise Zhang’s case and the targeting of lawyer Ren Qiuanniu with the Chinese authorities at every opportunity.”