

China crackdown on rights lawyers 'shocking': UN expert

Thursday 17 December 2020, by [AFP](#) (Date first published: 17 December 2020).

A UN rights expert on Wednesday slammed a years-long crackdown on rights defenders and lawyers in China, highlighting the case of one attorney who disappeared after revealing he was tortured in detention.

Mary Lawlor, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, warned that a clampdown that began more than five years ago aimed at courtroom critics of Communist authorities was continuing unabated.

Rights activists and their lawyers continue to be charged, detained, disappeared and tortured, said the independent expert, who does not speak on behalf of the United Nations.

"Since the so-called 709 crackdown began on 9 July 2015, the profession of human rights lawyer has been effectively criminalised in China," she said.

In her statement, which was endorsed by seven other UN rights experts, Lawlor pointed to the recent arrest and *"enforced disappearance"* of activist and attorney Chang Weiping as emblematic of Beijing's efforts to silence lawyers who speak out about the deterioration of human rights in the country.

The lawyer, she said, was placed by security officials in Baoji city in a form of secret extrajudicial detention typically used against dissidents, known as *"residential surveillance in a designated location"* (RSDL), for 10 days last January.

He was held on suspicion of *"subversion of state power"* and his licence was annulled, she said.

Just days after he posted a video online in October describing the torture and ill-treatment he was allegedly subjected to during his detention, he was detained again and returned to RSDL in retaliation for his video.

"Since then, the defender's whereabouts remain unknown, his lawyers have been unable to contact him and no charges have been brought against him," Wednesday's statement said.

Lawlor slammed the "shocking display of disregard for human rights" shown by the authorities, who "have re-arrested a human rights defender for courageously sharing his experience and denouncing human rights violations."

"The fact that the lawyers initially hired by Mr. Weiping's family to represent him have both withdrawn from his case due to pressure they received from officials is also telling of the gravity and scale of the situation faced by human rights defenders and lawyers in China."

"Fundamental human rights are not a threat to any government or society, and neither are the individuals who defend those rights," she added.

"I urge the Chinese authorities to release at once Chang Weiping and all other detained and disappeared human rights defenders."