

China crackdown on rights lawyers 'shocking': Rights expert

Friday 15 January 2021, by [Al Jazeera](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2020).

Rights activists and their lawyers continue to be charged, detained, disappeared and tortured according to UN special rapporteur on situation of human rights defenders.

A United Nations rights expert has slammed a years-long crackdown on rights defenders and legal professionals in China, highlighting the case of one lawyer who disappeared after revealing he was tortured in detention.

Mary Lawlor, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, warned on Wednesday that a clampdown aimed at courtroom critics of the Chinese authorities that began more than five years ago 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 global body.

"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.

There was no immediate comment by Beijing. Chinese President Xi Jinping's administration has tightened control over almost every aspect of civil society since 2012, citing the need to buttress national security and stability.

China consistently rejects any criticism of its human rights record, saying it adheres to the rule of law.

UN expert [@MaryLawlorhrds](#) expresses dismay at shocking treatment of [#HumanRights](#) defenders and lawyers in [#China](#), saying they continue to be charged, detained, disappeared and tortured. Learn more: <https://t.co/FePB69ATh3pic.twitter.com/l4kk1MlOga>

— UN Special Procedures (@UN_SPExperts) [December 16, 2020](#)

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.

"In a worrying display of disregard for human rights, the authorities have re-arrested a human rights defender for courageously sharing his experience and denouncing human rights violations, and attempted to portray him as a threat to national security," said Lawlor.

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, Lawlor added.

Just days after Weiping 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.

‘Shocking display’

The UN statement said Weiping’s whereabouts remain unknown, with his lawyers unable to contact him, despite no charges being brought against him by the authorities.

Lawlor condemned 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.

Lawlor said that while she respected and appreciated the “importance of safeguarding national security and the right of every Government to do so”, it should not come at the cost of the “livelihoods of its citizens and their human rights”.

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

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