

Civil society mobilises, calls for support to at-risk defenders in China

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A series of harsh convictions and new detentions, coming on the heels of high-level EU visits, demonstrate that despite its rhetoric, rule of law and universal rights remain anathema to the Chinese Communist Party. The international community needs to back words with action to prevent further violations.



Yu Wensheng – Image: Badiucao

During the 52nd session of the Human Rights Council in March 2023, the European Union and many member States – including France – spoke out on the situation of human rights in China. The EU even included a [long list of cases of concern](#), covering lawyers, NGO workers, citizen journalists and many more.

Yet just days following the conclusion of the Council's debates, President Macron and EU Commissioner President Ursula von der Leyen traveled to China for official meetings where human rights were clearly *not* on the agenda. Von der Leyen, in her [closing press statement](#), included a vanishingly brief paragraph that sought to balance concern about the situation in Xinjiang with misplaced optimism in the resumption of the EU-China Human Rights Dialogue.

According to press reports, President Macron's official statement included even less.

Xi Jinping apparently took this as a sign; promptly following the Europeans' departures, on 10 April 2023 Chinese courts announced the sentencing of legal scholar Xu Zhiyong and human rights lawyer Ding Jiayi to 14 and 12 years' imprisonment, respectively, for the alleged crime of 'subversion of State power'.

'Unfortunately, the messaging from both Brussels and Paris seems to imply that there's a new opportunity to engage with China,' says ISHR programme director Sarah M Brooks. 'That's just nuts.'

'The Chinese government has not fundamentally changed since 2019 – or if it has, for human rights defenders, lawyers and their families, it has been for the worse.'

ISHR is proud to join Lawyers for Lawyers, the 29 Principles, The Rights Practice, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, and Lawyer's Rights Watch Canada in a public statement

[condemning the sentences and calling for the defenders' immediate release.](#)

The shock of the sentences sent ripple effects throughout the human rights community, and even resulted in a series of remarks from other governments, including [Switzerland](#), [Australia](#), the [US](#), and - yes - [France](#) (jointly with Germany). UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk also issued a [measured statement](#) expressing concern - though it fell short of calling for the defenders' release or condemning their sham trial.

'This miscarriage of justice deserves more than just "concern" - it deserves condemnation, and a coordinated effort to secure their liberty,' Brooks adds.

Even as efforts to push back on the sentences of Xu and Ding were underway, a third European visit to Beijing - this time of high-level foreign affairs officials - was marred by the harassment, restrictions of freedom of movement, and ultimate detention of [lawyers and human rights defenders invited to meet with the delegation](#).

By the end of the weekend, lawyer and Martin Ennals Award recipient Yu Wensheng and his wife and fellow activist Xu Yan had been stopped on the Beijing subway and taken away by plainclothes police, on grounds of 'picking quarrels and provoking troubles'. And once again, civil society is [mobilising to send them support](#), and encourage governments to use all avenues to press for their release.

'The international community has a long record of making statements of support and concern about Chinese rights activists in general - and, in Yu Wensheng's case, even recognising him with multiple awards. But this is not sufficient,' Brooks concludes. 'Defenders need to see that these words are backed by sustained action to halt further violations, and secure justice for those so unjustly punished for their defence of human rights'.

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P.S.

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