

PRISONERS OF faith

Shi Weihan Country: China

Prominent House church leader and Christian businessman Shi Weihan, has been held in detention for the past three months by the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau on the grounds that he is 'a dangerous religious element'. The ongoing detention and absence of any formal charge simply highlights how the Chinese government is struggling to convince critics that it has expanded religious freedom and tolerance.

Shi opened his 'Holy Spirit Bookstore' in a north Beijing office tower in March 2006. The businessman who also runs a travel agency, became a Christian more than a decade ago and began an informal house church called the 'Antioch Eternal Life Church'. Each Sunday, 20 to 30 worshippers meet in a room next to the store. Police initially arrested Shi on 28 November, 2007, charging him with 'illegal business practices,' but officials ordered his release on 4 January, citing insufficient evidence. He was arrested again on 19 March. There had been speculation that officials had charged Shi with distributing illegal publications, but sources say this is unlikely as materials confiscated from his Christian bookstore have all been returned and the store allowed to continue operating. Shi's bookshop, located near the Olympic Village, operated legally and sold only books for which he had obtained government permission. Police allegedly are monitoring the movements of Shi's lawyer to ensure little or no contact with foreign human rights groups. Shi's friends insist that he is an honest citizen with an 'infectious' love for China. Shi, who suffers from diabetes, had been expected to appear in court 19 June but the hearing didn't take place. His health is deteriorating and friends say his wife and two daughters are suffering extreme distress as they are not permitted to visit or pass on the vital medication. Claiming an ongoing investigation into what they are

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EMAIL ALERT
for prayer & action
JULY 2008



Shi Weihan with his wife and two daughters

calling 'a complex case', the authorities have been able to hold Shi in an undisclosed location without giving any assurances that he is receiving the necessary medication. The authorities appear to be delaying any action on this case indefinitely fueling concern regarding his general well being

On May 16, the public security bureau also froze the bank account of the Antioch Eternal Life house church led by Shi. Apparently officials are also investigating links between the church leader and China Aid Association President Bob Fu.

PLEASE PRAY

- ▶ That God will strengthen Shi Weihan and his family
- ▶ For the charges against the him to be dropped and that he is released
- ▶ For God to give courage and wisdom to the Chinese house church leaders

'But while Peter was in prison, the church prayed very earnestly for him'
Acts 12:5

release INTERNATIONAL
THE VOICE OF THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

Hebrews 13:3 'Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering'

When writing please do not mention Release International, or advance your political opinion or include anything which could be insulting to the authorities. Do not send money

You may also write a letter on his behalf to

(Date)

His Excellency Hu Jintao
President, People's Republic of China
c/o His Excellency Ambassador Zha Peixin
Embassy of the People's Republic of China
49-51 Portland Place
London W1B 1JL
United Kingdom

Your Excellency,

I am writing to request your help to secure the release of the Christian businessman Mr Shi Weihang who was arrested in March 2008 and is currently detained by the Beijing Municipal Public Security Bureau apparently on the grounds that he somehow represents a dangerous religious element to society. Friends and colleagues who know Shi Weihang well, testify to his love for his nation, her proud history and her many accomplishments. They know him as being someone who teaches others to love their country and to pray for their Government.

In recent years it would appear that the Chinese authorities have increasingly sought to criminalise the legitimate activities and practices of certain lay church leaders like Shi Weihang. Mr Shi Weihang is someone who is proud to be Chinese and is a good citizen, but who is denied the opportunity to practise his faith in a way that is guaranteed by Article 35 of your constitution. I believe this particular case has more to do with basic human rights and in particular the right to freedom of religion than it has with any alleged subversive or criminal activity.

Whilst recognising the progress that your government has made in advancing religious freedom over recent years, I graciously urge your Excellency to ensure that these rights are both honoured and preserved. I believe it to be in the best interests of one of the world's leading nations to act with integrity and to uphold the rights of all of its citizens. In the run up to and during the Beijing Olympics, when your country will be the focus of unprecedented international interest, rather than losing face on account of any human rights abuses, there is undoubtedly an opportunity for the People's Republic of China, to champion human rights and religious freedom and in so doing, be acknowledged by the international community to be a worthy and successful host of the 2008 Olympic Games.

It has been reported that Mr Shi Weihang suffers from chronic diabetes and that as a result of his detention his health is failing. I ask for your help to ensure that he is given the necessary medication, that he is granted full access to a lawyer of his choice, and that if the case is not proven, it will be dismissed and the accused released without prejudice.

Yours sincerely

(Signature)

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