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U.N. Rights Group Calls on China to Release Lawyer

By EDWARD WONG, 28 March 2011

BEIJING — A United Nations human rights agency has demanded that the Chinese government immediately release a prominent Chinese human rights lawyer who has been detained for nearly a year, according to a statement released on Monday by an advocacy group. The lawyer, Gao Zhisheng, had said he was tortured during previous rounds of detention.



Gemunu Amarasinghe/Associated Press

Gao Zhisheng has been detained for nearly a year.

The agency, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, also said in a written statement that the Chinese government should “provide for reparation of the harm caused” to Mr. Gao. A feisty Christian who has been repeatedly detained, Mr. Gao has defended practitioners of Falun Gong, the banned spiritual group that came under a brutal crackdown by Chinese security forces.

“The U.N. Working Group held that the detention violated international law because Gao’s disappearance was punishment for exercising his fundamental human rights and because the government failed to meet even the minimum international standards for due process,” the group said in its statement. That statement was first sent to the Chinese government in July, and was made public on Monday by Freedom Now, an advocacy group that has worked on Mr. Gao’s case.

In making its statement, the working group was chastising one of the countries with the most influence at the United Nations — with one of the five permanent seats, China wields a veto in the Security Council. The Web site of the working group studying detention lists five members, from Senegal, Pakistan, Chile, Norway and Ukraine. The group files reports to the United Nations Human Rights Council.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry had no immediate response.

Mr. Gao's case has drawn intense scrutiny from human rights advocates because he said he was tortured when he was detained in 2007, and again for 14 months that ended in March 2010.

During the earlier confinement, he was beaten with electric batons, and burning cigarettes were placed near his eyes, he told people after being released. The second time he was detained, security officers beat him with holstered handguns during one particularly horrific two-day spell, he told The Associated Press last April. Two weeks later, he disappeared again, and he has not been heard from since.

In the interview with a video producer and reporter from The A.P., which was conducted in a Beijing teahouse, Mr. Gao described being moved from one site to another in Beijing, Shaanxi Province and the far western region of Xinjiang. He said he was hooded at various times, tied up with belts, made to sit motionless for up to 16 hours and threatened with death. He said one captor told him in September 2009: "You must forget you're human. You're a beast."

Mr. Gao was detained shortly after his wife, Geng He, fled to the United States by way of Thailand in early 2009. She sought asylum, and now lives in San Francisco with their two children.

In recent weeks, the Chinese authorities have detained an extraordinary number of rights advocates, lawyers and dissidents. The crackdown began in late February, when mysterious calls for a Jasmine Revolution in China, modeled after the recent Tunisian uprising, surfaced on the Internet. That call coincided with the annual meeting of the National People's Congress and a consultative legislature, which is generally a politically delicate time in Beijing.

China Human Rights Defenders, an advocacy group, said last week that at least 23 people had been detained for criminal investigation, and scores of others for no stated reason.