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Leading Chinese rights lawyer receives 3-year sentence

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Beijing - China said it would impose a suspended three-year prison sentence on leading rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng on Friday, almost five years after he was released on probation.

A Beijing court announced that Gao would have to serve his sentence because he had violated the terms of his probation, which had been scheduled to end next week, state media reported.

'He had seriously violated probation rules a number of times, which led to the court decision to withdraw the probation,' the official Xinhua news agency quoted a court statement as saying.

The agency gave no details of the alleged violations by Gao, 47, who has been missing for nearly two years and spent nearly five years under house arrest after he was convicted of subversion in 2006.

Amnesty International decried the move, calling it 'shocking.'

'There is nothing that was legal about the way authorities handled the case of Gao Zhisheng,' said Amnesty director Catherine Baber. She demanded his release.

Noting reports of abuse against Gao and the fact that he had been missing for so long, Baber said: 'This inhumane treatment must stop.'

Gao's brother, Gao Zhiyi, told dpa that his family were not informed of Friday's court

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statement and believed that Gao's five-year probation period had ended in August.

'We don't understand why this is happening,' Gao Zhiyi said of the decision to make his brother serve the prison sentence.

He said the family had had no contact with Gao Zhisheng since early last year.

In an account released in January by his wife, Geng He, from exile in the United States, Gao said he was 'tortured to near death' during an earlier period of illegal detention and house arrest from 2005 to 2008.

In the account, which Geng said was written in January 2009, Gao said he was 'constantly in a situation of peril.'

'Since more than three years, the authorities invested a large amount of manpower, money as well as employed the most merciless methods to achieve their goal to silence me,' he wrote.

Gao Zhisheng was once hailed by the Chinese government as one of the nation's top 10 attorneys.

He took on highly sensitive cases despite threats, violence and imprisonment by authorities under the ruling Communist Party.

His own persecution by China's judicial authorities made him a cause celebre for rights activists inside and outside China, bringing his name to the attention of two US presidents and to the Nobel peace prize committee in 2008.

In the years leading up to his conviction, Gao had often called China's one-party rulers 'barbaric' and likened them to 'mafia bosses.'

He had campaigned on behalf of protesting farmers, dissidents, Christians, AIDS activists and fellow rights lawyers.

The government closed his Beijing-based Shengzhi law firm in 2005 after he called via the internet for an end to the persecution of members of the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement.

An English translation of his book, A China More Just, was published in 2007.

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