

Joint Statement from Civil Society Groups on the Chinese Government's Arbitrary Detention of Journalist Zhang Zhan

We, the undersigned press freedom and human rights organisations, strongly condemn the Chinese government's ongoing arbitrary detention of journalist, human rights defender and former lawyer Zhang Zhan, on the 5th anniversary of her arrest.

Zhang is an outspoken journalist, and one of many Chinese citizens who are imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of the press and expression. Zhang Zhan [was first detained](#) on 14 May 2020, after she travelled to the city of Wuhan to courageously report on the early stages of Covid-19 pandemic, documenting overflowing hospitals, empty shops, and families of victims and independent journalists being harassed by the authorities. She is currently persecuted for supporting pro-democracy activist Zhang Pancheng, and reporting on human rights violations in the country.

At the beginning of March 2025, NGOs sources confirmed that Zhang will soon be tried on the charge of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble", a charge often used by Chinese authorities to suppress journalists, writers and human rights defenders. The date of her trial is still unknown, as she remains detained in the Pudong Detention Center in Shanghai, facing an additional up to 5 years in prison if convicted.

Zhang Zhan, was apprehended by the police on 28 August 2024, only three months after completion of an earlier four-year sentence under the same charge, while travelling to her hometown in the Shaanxi province in northwest China. In the weeks leading up to this incident, Zhang kept reporting on the harassment of activists in China on her social media.

Her first detention was deemed arbitrary under international human rights law by the UN's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention in a 2021 [opinion](#). In a November 2024 [letter](#) to the Chinese government, nine UN Special Procedures mandates raised lengthy concerns about patterns of repression against Zhang Zhan, alongside 17 other human rights defenders, requesting the government to take measures to prevent any irreparable damage to life and personal integrity, and halt the violations of her human rights. The government's three-lines response on Zhang Zhan's status merely asserted that "her legitimate rights and interests have been fully protected."

China remains one of the most repressive countries for freedom of speech and press, and ranks 178th out of 180 in the 2025 Reporters without Borders (RSF)'s [World Press Freedom Index](#), and is the world's leading jailer of journalists and writers, according to data from [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), [RSF](#), and [PEN America](#).

The charge "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" was used against over [100 individuals](#) for peacefully exercising or defending human rights between 2019 and 2024. Chinese authorities often used this crime to justify political persecution of human rights defenders, including journalists. In March 2024, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk, also called on the Chinese government to revise the "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" provision and release all HRDs, lawyers, and others detained under that charge.

In detention, Zhang Zhan has engaged in intermittent hunger strikes to protest her arbitrary detention. In 2021 she was twice hospitalised due to severe malnutrition and a rapid deterioration of her health.

In January 2025, Zhang Zhan again re-started her hunger strike in protest of her second arrest. In response, detention centre personnel have subjected her to forced-feeding through a gastric tube – a practice that may amount to torture or other ill-treatment, in violation of the Convention against Torture ratified by China in 1988. Her lawyer has been allowed to meet with her but has been under pressure from the authorities not to disclose the case details publicly.

Despite the relentless calls of the international community to immediately release Zhang Zhan, the Chinese government continues to ignore the urgency of the matter. Yet, the restrictions against journalists or anyone who speaks out against the abuse of the government has tightened drastically, despite the right to freedom of speech and press being guaranteed by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as by Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution. Zhang's prosecution is being used as a warning to others who might challenge the government's propaganda machine.

Zhang Zhan's arbitrary detention is a mockery of China's international human rights obligations to ensure humane prison conditions. Furthermore, Zhang Zhan has committed no internationally recognisable offence, but has been subjected to harsh punishment for reporting on facts and exercising her right to freedom of expression.

We urge the Chinese government to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Zhang Zhan and put an end to all acts of harassment towards her;
- Guarantee Zhang Zhan's safety, psychological well-being and access to adequate and independent medical care;
- Allow her unhindered access to her family members and lawyer of her choosing;
- Submit its state report to the Committee against Torture (CAT), which is over five years overdue, including providing information on the conditions in secret detention and Residential Surveillance at a Designated Location, and providing concrete legislative measures and data about the implementation of previous CAT recommendations concerning these practices;
- Put an end to systemic crackdown on civil society, including harassment, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detention of journalists, writers, and human rights defenders.

We urge UN bodies and officials, including High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk, and governments concerned with human rights in China to:

- Increase support to journalists, writers, and human rights defenders across and from China;
- Advocate for the releases of arbitrary detained journalists, writers, and human rights defenders, including using high-level meetings to publicly call for the release of specific individuals by name;
- Condition international law enforcement interactions and rule of law cooperation with the Chinese government on the government's dropping all charges and quashing all

convictions against those wrongfully detained for peacefully exercising or advocating human rights, including press freedom and right to information.

Signatories:

ARTICLE 19

Alliance for Citizens Rights

Amnesty International

Association of Taiwan Journalists (ATJ)

Cambodian Journalists Alliance Association (CamboJA)

China Aid Association (ChinaAid)

China Change

China Dissent Network

Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD)

Coalition For Women In Journalism

Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong (CFHK) Foundation

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Den norske Tibet komité

Dialogue China

European Values Center for Security Policy Taiwan Office

Fortify Rights

Front Line Defenders

Georgetown Center for Asian Law

Gerakan Media Merdeka (GERAMM)

Global Alliance for Tibet & Persecuted Minorities

Grupo de Apoio ao Tibete-Portugal

Hong Kong Committee in Norway

Hong Kong Watch

Human Rights Watch

Human Rights in China (HRIC)

Humanitarian China

Independent Chinese PEN Center

Index on Censorship

International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)

International Tibet Network

International Women's Media Foundation

l'ACAT-France

Legal Initiatives for Vietnam (LIV)

No Business With Genocide

PEN America

PEN International

Reporters Without Borders (RSF)

Safeguard Defenders

Santa Barbara Friends of Tibet

Scottish Hongkongers

Solidarité Chine

Students for a Free Tibet

Taiwan Association of Human Rights (TAHR)
Taiwan Foreign Correspondents Club (TFCC)
The Human Rights Foundation
The Rights Practice
The Tibet Support Committee, Denmark
Tibet Action Institute
Tibet Solidarity
Tibet Support Group Ireland
Tibet Watch
Uyghur Human Rights Project (UHRP)
Vancouver Activists of Hong Kong (VAHK)
Vancouver Society in Support of Democratic Movement (VSSDM)
Victoria Hongkongers Association (VHKA)
Viet Tan
World Liberty Congress
World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the
Protection of Human Rights Defenders