

U.N. rights body calls on China to release rights lawyer

(Reuters) - China's best known rights lawyer, missing for nearly a year, is being detained in violation of international law, a United Nations human rights body said in a statement made public on Monday, and it called for his immediate release.

The whereabouts of Gao Zhisheng, a Christian lawyer who helped defend members of China's banned Falun Gong spiritual group, have been unknown since April last year, when he resurfaced briefly after being abducted from his relative's home in Shaanxi province in early February 2009.

The U.N. working group on arbitrary detention said China's government should "provide for reparation of the harm caused" to Gao, who has previously claimed he was tortured in detention.

"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 a statement.

The group, composed of independent experts in human rights and international law from Senegal, Pakistan, Chile, Norway and Ukraine, adjudicates in complaints about arbitrary detention worldwide. It reports to the U.N. Human Rights Council.

China's Foreign Ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The ruling comes amid an intensified crackdown on lawyers, bloggers and dissidents in China as the ruling Communist Party clamps down on the risk of unrest, particularly after online calls for "Jasmine" pro-democracy gatherings in the wake of civil unrest in parts of the Middle East.

Dozens of dissidents have disappeared and their families and human rights activists fear they face long periods of "extra-judicial" incarceration.

In an opinion piece published on Sunday on the New York Times website, Gao's wife, Geng He, appealed to U.S. President Barack Obama to seek the release of her husband.

Geng, who has sought asylum in the United States with her family, said Obama should ask Chinese President Hu Jintao to allow Gao to contact his family.

"The Chinese government must not be allowed to claim that China is a nation operating under the rule of law while persecuting those who try to ensure that it respects the law," Geng wrote. "And when the government silences dissent, the international community must speak up."

On Friday, a Chinese court sentenced a leading Chinese dissident to 10 years in prison for urging democratic reform of the one-party state, an unusually harsh sentence that rights campaigners say could bode ill for other detained activists.

(Reporting by Sui-Lee Wee; Editing by Ben Blanchard and Ian Geoghegan)