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China: Woman human rights defender Zhang Zhan's health deteriorates in prison after torture and hunger strike

Woman human rights defender **Zhang Zhan's** health has seriously deteriorated as a result of torture and ill-treatment, and the hunger strike she is conducting to protest her imprisonment in the Shanghai Women's Prison. She was force-fed by prison authorities in a prison hospital from 31 July to 11 August 2021.

[Zhang Zhan \(张展\)](#) is an independent journalist, former lawyer and woman human rights defender who has been vocal against human rights violations and suppression of dissent in China. She has used her legal training and knowledge to help other human rights defenders to claim their rights through legal channels. In February 2020, Zhang Zhan visited Wuhan city in Hubei province of China to report on the COVID-19 outbreak from the ground. In 2019, the woman human rights defender expressed support for the Hong Kong protests by posting comments, writing articles and holding up placards to support the protesters, as a result of which she was arbitrarily detained and was forced to undergo psychiatric examinations while in custody.

Between her formal arrest in June 2020 and her trial in December 2020, Zhang Zhan went on a full hunger strike in the Pudong New District Detention Centre to protest her arbitrary detention. During her hunger strike, the woman human rights defender was force-fed using a feeding tube, shackled, and had her hands restrained for more than three months. When Zhang Zhan appeared in the Pudong New District Court for her trial on 28 December 2020, she was in a wheelchair and appeared extremely frail.

She continued her hunger strike in the Shanghai Women's prison. As a result, she has lost half her weight and is suffering from a stomach ulcer and other conditions associated with malnutrition. According to [reports](#), Zhang Zhan was sent to a prison hospital on 31 July 2021, but even at the hospital, she was tied to a bed and forced-fed for 11 days before being sent back to the prison.

In Wuhan, Zhang Zhan [reported](#) extensively on the COVID-19 outbreak and the inadequate measures taken by the government for those affected. She also reported on the suppression of dissent and the silencing and disappearance of various journalists on the ground. She was repeatedly [warned](#) against her reportage by the police, before she went missing in Wuhan on 14 May 2020. A day later, she resurfaced in Shanghai in the custody of the Shanghai Public Security Bureau's Pudong branch on the suspicion of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble".

On 19 June 2020, the Pudong New District Procuratorate approved her arrest and later indicted her on 15 September 2020. The indictment accused her of "spreading false information" and "maliciously stirring up the Wuhan epidemic situation". On 28 December 2020, Zhang Zhan went on trial at the Pudong New District Court and was handed a four-year sentence. The crime of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" under Article 293 of the Chinese Criminal Law is a broadly defined and vaguely worded offence that has been widely used to target activists and human rights defenders.

This is not the first reprisal against Zhang Zhan. In 2019, she was detained on more than one occasion for speaking out in support of the protests in Hong Kong, and was also forced to undergo psychiatric examinations twice.

Article 17 of the [Prison Law of China](#) provides that individuals sentenced to life imprisonment or fixed-term imprisonment may, after physical examination, be temporarily released from prison on parole for medical treatment if they are seriously ill. Zhang Zhan's health has alarmingly deteriorated in custody due to her hunger strike, and the torture inflicted on her in prison has further aggravated her health conditions.

Front Line Defenders is seriously concerned by the treatment and arbitrary detention of Zhang Zhan, and it believes that she is being targeted for her peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights. The deterioration of Zhang Zhan's health highlights the long-standing risks of harsh conditions in China's detention facilities and the lack of prompt and regular access to adequate medical care for human rights defenders who are unjustly imprisoned.

Front Line Defenders urges the relevant authorities in China to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release Zhang Zhan and quash the conviction and sentence against her;
2. Provide Zhang Zhan with adequate medical attention and immediately cease all attempts to force-feed her;
3. Ensure that, pending her release, Zhang Zhan is not subjected to any form of torture or other ill-treatment, in strict adherence to the conditions set out in the 'Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988. Ensure as well that Zhang Zhan has immediate, regular and unrestricted access to legal counsel of her choice, and is able to communicate and meet with family members, without undue interference;
4. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in China are able to carry out their human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions, in line with China's international human rights obligations and commitments;
5. Initiate a comprehensive legal reform process, in genuine consultation with independent civil society and human rights defenders, to review existing laws, regulations, policies and practices, especially provisions related to offences criminalising peaceful expression used to target human rights defenders, with a view to aligning them with China's obligations under international human rights law and standards.