

From China to Spain to flee discriminatory arrests and torture

The case of Zhang Wenbo, a member of the Church of Almighty God

Human Rights Without Frontiers calls upon the Spanish authorities to grant refugee status to believers of all faiths that are persecuted in China.

HRWF (27.05.2020) - In December 2019, **Zhang Wenbo**, 50, landed in Spain after escaping the "Chinese Communist paradise" where he had spent nearly his entire life. He hopes to start a new life in this safe haven, where he is free to practice his religion without fear. About 600 asylum seekers from China who fled harsh religious persecution are still waiting for Madrid to recognise them as refugees. Spain has not threatened to deport any of them, but it has not granted them political asylum either.

Zhang Wenbo was born in a Christian family in Henan province, one of the cradles of Chinese civilization. As an adult he converted to The Church of Almighty God, and he has now been a member of it for 22 years. He was arrested twice by the Chinese police in 2003 and 2012 due to his missionary activities inside the country. Both times, he was subjected to inhumane torture and nearly killed.

He shared his experience of religious persecution in China with *Human Rights Without Frontiers* (HRWF):

Arrested and tortured in 2003

"I was arrested for the first time because of my faith in 2003. Over a dozen police officers surrounded the place where four of us were worshipping. We were apprehended and tortured to reveal the names of our church leaders. I was forced into painful positions for prolonged periods of time, such as half squatting. Additionally, they shone a 1000-watt spotlight into my eyes which caused severe pain in my head, but they would beat me if I closed my eyes.

After this incident, the police visited my furniture shop frequently. They would ask me whether I continued believing in God. Sometimes they would take me to the police station and try to force me to revoke my faith. To evade potential arrest and further persecution from the Communist Party of China (CCP), I had no choice but to go into hiding."

Arrested again and tortured in 2012

"On 17 December 2012, the director of Tongren City Public Security Bureau and over a dozen officers discovered our hiding place. They confiscated more than 10 cellphones, 6,000 RMB (about 850 USD) in cash and a deposit book. They then took me to the Bijiang District Police Station of Tongren City, where they interrogated me about our church leaders. As I refused to cooperate, they slapped me in the face, punched me and kicked me. I was assaulted to the point that I felt dizzy and pain all over.

Over the course of 16 days, I was subjected to torture as the officers tried to force me to talk. I was taken to the basement of the police station for the so-called 'swing treatment'. While handcuffed, I was hung on a door frame so that my feet were no longer touching the ground. They tied my feet to a rope and then, for an hour and a half, they swung my legs back and forth. This caused excruciating pain in my wrists and blackened my hands.

Since I still refused to betray our church leaders, they then laid me on the ground and hit my back, waist and shoulders with a 70 cm long steel tube, fracturing my ribs. I was then forced to kneel, and this steel tube was rolled over my calves. This was so painful that I thought it was crushing my knees and ankles.

Then, one of my handcuffed wrists was hung high above my head on the wall, so that only one of my feet could touch the ground, whilst the other hand was tied around my back. This meant I was hanging from one arm and barely standing on one leg, and so I could neither stand or squat down.

On 3 January 2013, I was transferred to Bijiang District Detention Center in Tongren City. I was detained there for an additional 13 days.

During my detention, I was fed minimally. Other inmates often abused me and beat me up due to instigation from the guards. Also, at one point, the authorities forced me into a wooden chair and stabbed my genitals with a long iron awl.

On 26 January 2013, my family and friends from the church used their connections to obtain my release on bail. My freedom was bought with 16,000 RMB (about 2,290 USD), although the standard fee was registered as only 3,000 RMB (about 430 USD).

To this day I have not recovered from this torture. It traumatized me and created long-term physical damage to the extent that now I am unable to do any physical labor.”

Under constant threat of a new arrest: no choice but to flee

“After my release in 2013, I was under strict surveillance by the police. I had to report to them every month and they threatened and interrogated me on a regular basis.

Between 2013 and 2018, I was always on the run, moving from place to place and living in constant fear and pain. While preaching in Sanmenxia City of Henan Province in 2013, I was reported to the police and narrowly escaped arrest. In 2016, I was questioned by the police in Yiyang City. Ultimately, I realized that I had no alternative but to leave China if I wanted to live according to my faith.

In December 2019, I managed, with great difficulty, to obtain a passport and flee to Spain. I submitted my asylum application and received an interim residence permit. In February 2020, my case was heard by the refugee board. Now I’m awaiting the decision from the Spanish government.”

HRWF Comment: During his interview with HRWF, he disclosed many more details about additional sexual torture that he was subjected to.