



## Chinese citizens indifferent to shutdown of NGO Gongmeng

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**By Song Shengxia**

Authorities in Beijing have launched a probe into alleged tax evasion by a volunteer lawyers' group, which was shut down in July.

Beijing Gongmeng Consulting Co Ltd, known as Gongmeng or Open Constitution Initiative was set up by a group of lawyers who were known for several high-profile cases, including voluntarily representing parents of children who fell victims to tainted Sanlu milk powder.

Xu Zhiyong, the legal representative of the group, and Zhuang Lu, the group's accountant, were detained by police last Wednesday for alleged tax evasion involving a \$100,000 donation from Yale University, a group staff member told the Global Times yesterday.

The legal research center attached to the group was shut down by Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau on the grounds the center was not a "legal entity." The group's computers, desks and legal files were also seized.

"The group was fined 1.49 million yuan (\$218,000) for the alleged evasion. If Xu fails to pay the fines, he could face a seven-year-term in prison," said Tian Qizhuang, a staff member at Gongmeng.

Although Gongmeng is known as a "non-profit organization," it was virtually a private business registered under the Beijing Administration of Industry and Commerce.

According to law, any organization registered as a corporation must pay taxes for any proceeds it receives, including donations.

“It is hard to register as an NGO, because you need to find a ‘responsible governmental sector’ to vouch for you, most of whom do not want to look into your case. So we chose to register as a company although we are engaged in charity work,” Xu told the Global Times in July before he was detained.

The probe into the group continues and it is unclear when the hearings will be held, Tian said.

Both Beijing Civil Affairs Bureau and Beijing Administration of Industry and Commerce declined to comment yesterday.

“The government is keeping a special eye on such groups because they are tending to challenge the authority through extreme means and undermine stability,” Wang Sixin, a law professor in Beijing, told the Global Times. “The government often resorts to legal means to regulate such groups. Many countries do the same.”

The group’s shutdown made headlines in the New York Times on July 19. However, the incident has met with an indifferent response in China.

“The group might be one which promotes charity work. But why does it matter to me?” said Tang Liang, a Beijing resident. “What I’m concerned about is how to get a job and if I can afford to buy an apartment.”

And domestic media reports on Gongmeng in China are rather sparse, the Global Times learned. Even though there are online posts on Gongmeng’s shutdown, it was easily buried among lots of other quickly updated news on topics such as healthcare reform, real estate price rises and mass incidents.

The indifference prevailed in similar past incidents, which received less public attention.

Huang Qi, a lawyer, who represented parents of children killed in last year’s earthquake in Sichuan Province, was detained for illegally holding “State secrets.” The parents blamed their children’s deaths on the poor quality of school buildings, the Hong Kong-based Ming Pao reported.

“The indifference shows many people are clearly utilitarian in thinking”, Wang said.

*Cao Ruishu contributed to this story*

<http://china.globaltimes.cn/society/2009-08/455329.html>