Ai Weiwei's wife urges China to drop plan on detentions

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By Sui-Lee Wee

BEIJING (Reuters) - The wife of Chinese dissident artist Ai Weiwei, whose detention sparked an international outcry, has urged lawmakers to reject draft legislation that would cement in law police powers to hold dissidents in secret locations without telling their families.

Human rights advocates have decried China's proposed amendments to its Criminal Procedure Code that could embolden authorities to go further with the kind of shadowy detentions, which have swept up human rights lawyers and veteran protesters earlier this year.

"If the above measures are passed, it will be a regression for China's legal system, the deterioration of human rights, and will be a hindrance to the progress of our civilization," Lu Qing wrote in a letter to the legislative working committee of the National People's Congress, a copy of which was posted on Ai's Google Plus account.

"(When) a citizen is taken away by a public security arm, a notice to the family members is the most basic right," she said, adding that she wrote the letter after China's rubber-stamp parliament invited citizens to comment on the draft legislation.

Activists occasionally write letters to parliament but they are invariably greeted with stony silence as Chinese lawmakers usually offer little or no opposition to policies decided by the Chinese Communist Party, which values stability above all else.

Ai, who spent 81 days in detention this year, was released in late June after he was taken from the Beijing airport and held in two secret locations.

In her letter, Lu wrote that the family still had not received any official notice on Ai's detention.

The artist, famed for his work on the "Bird's Nest" Olympic Stadium in Beijing, was the most internationally well-known of those detained, and his family has repeatedly said he was targeted by authorities for his outspoken criticism of censorship and Communist Party controls.

Calls to Lu went unanswered, but Ai confirmed that his wife had sent her comments online on Wednesday morning and had the letter delivered by courier. But he said lawmakers were unlikely to react to Lu's letter.

When asked about the letter, China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said: "I think some people need to better uphold the Chinese constitution and law." He did not elaborate.

"SITUATION ISN'T VERY GOOD"

In his first scathing attack on Beijing since his release, Ai wrote in late August that Chinese officials have denied citizens their basic rights.
Under the conditions of his release, Ai is not allowed to be interviewed by journalists and use the Internet, and he had gone largely silent since the commentary.

Asked whether he had come under more pressure from the authorities, Ai said: "I cannot do any interviews anymore, I’m very sorry, but my situation isn’t very good," adding that he was "strictly" not allowed to use the Internet.

When Ai was released on bail, the Chinese government said he remained under investigation for suspicion of economic crimes, including tax evasion. Ai told Reuters earlier that he had not received a formal notice from the authorities to explain the allegation of suspected economic crimes.

The proposed law released in late August by China’s National People’s Congress, the Communist Party-controlled parliament, says crime suspects and defendants detained under "residential surveillance" should usually be held in their own homes.

But politically sensitive crimes can be treated differently.

"Those suspected of committing state security crimes, terrorist crimes and major bribery crimes" can be held at locations outside usual detention centers, says the draft.

Likewise, the families of ordinary suspects and defendants held under "residential surveillance" should be notified of their status within 24 hours. But in state security and other sensitive cases, police do not have to tell the families "if notification could hinder investigations," says the draft.

China’s police already have broad powers to hold people, and the party-controlled courts rarely challenge how those powers are exercised.

(Additional reporting by Ben Blanchard, Editing by Ken Wills and Sugita Katyal)

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