China critic fears 'thousands' will vanish under new law

Proposed changes to Chinese law would make it legal to detain suspects without charge in secret locations. - AFP

BEIJING - Prominent Chinese activist Hu Jia, who was released from prison three months ago, said he feared "tens of thousands of people" could disappear under a proposed new law on secret detentions.

Hu, a leading government critic freed from jail in June, told AFP he would continue his activism and fight for the release of jailed Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, despite official efforts to muzzle him.

The 38-year-old this week publicly criticised proposed changes to Chinese law that would make it legal to detain suspects for up to six months, without charge, in secret locations away from police stations and official prisons.

In cases involving national security, terrorism or major corruption, police would not be obliged to contact the family members of suspects.

If the new law is approved "hundreds, thousands or even tens of thousands of people will disappear," Hu told AFP by phone after writing to lawmakers on Thursday condemning the proposed changes as violating basic human rights.

"This is an appeal from a citizen, a citizen who once disappeared."

Hu was jailed in April 2008 on subversion charges, just months before the Beijing Olympics, after angering the ruling Communist Party through years of bold campaigning for civil rights, the environment and AIDS patients.

Despite an official ban on him expressing "opinions publicly" after his release, Hu told AFP he was determined to speak out.

"I told the police clearly - I won't be restricted on issues concerning citizens rights and benefits as well as freedom," he said.

"In this country the government is the one that violates human rights, police officers are performing tasks that violate human rights... so I must express my resistance in public, express my condemnation."

China, which routinely insists that the rights of all its citizens are protected, has said Hu's case was treated in accordance with the law.

When he was jailed in 2008, a Chinese court said Hu had "spread malicious rumours and committed libel in an attempt to subvert the state's political power and socialist system," state media reported at the time.

In his letter to the parliamentary committee considering the legal change, Hu said that holding suspects in a secret location was a "painful torment" for the parents, spouse and children of the person detained.

"This violates the minimum humanity of the suspect who is not yet convicted by the law and the innocent family members of his or hers," Hu said in the letter to the legislative working committee of the National People's Congress.

"Such KGB secret police-style Red Terror methods have been used not only on me but also a lot of people such as rights lawyers, dissidents, artists, petitioners and family members of political criminals."

Although not officially legal, so-called "disappearances" have become a popular method of silencing dissidents in a crackdown that began in February, when calls for Arab-style protests began appearing on Chinese websites.

During his time in prison, Hu said he was only allowed to see his wife, Zeng Jinyan, his now three-year-old daughter and his parents. He wasn't permitted any contact with friends and the books he read were under "strict scrutiny".

Since his release, Hu said he has been deprived of his "political rights", his apartment in Beijing is constantly watched by "a lot" of plainclothes police and his friends are not allowed to visit.

Hu, who suffers from hepatitis B, said he was followed by a convoy of police vehicles and photographed when he went to the hospital for treatment, visited his parents or met with friends.

He can access the Internet "most of the time" but admitted he was "lonely".

"In this country, all citizens live in terror... but if you do nothing because you are in fear, you will never shake the..."
fear. You must safeguard the rights, you must speak out," Hu said.

Hu said he had attempted to visit the wife of jailed dissident Liu Xiaobo, Liu Xia, who has been under house arrest for months, but was stopped by police and briefly detained.

"I must free Liu Xia, I must let Liu Xia have the freedom to meet Liu Xiaobo every month," Hu said.

"Furthermore, we will strive for Liu Xiaobo's freedom."

He also planned to visit blind activist Chen Guangcheng, who has been under house arrest in eastern China since completing a jail term of more than four years in September 2010, even though he has been warned by police to stay away.

Despite the pain he and his family have suffered as a result of his activism, Hu said he would continue to fight for political change in China.

"I can't accept that my child has to take what we have taken, including disappearances and being thrown into prison. I have the power to push forward the democratic reforms," he said.

"We can't waste one day."