

Verdict Expected Soon in Chinese Activist's Retrial

BY Liz Townsend

Chen Guangcheng, whose activism on behalf of victims of forced abortions and sterilizations led to house arrest and a four-year jail sentence, is expected to hear the verdict of his second trial soon. A Chinese court agreed to retry Chen November 27 on charges of intentionally damaging property and organizing a mob to disrupt traffic, according to the South China Morning Post.

The second trial generated as much controversy as the first. Chen's lawyers were detained by police before the first trial in August and were unable to attend, according to the Los Angeles Times. While Chen's attorneys were able to represent him in late November, they accused prosecutors of continuously interrupting defense arguments, the Washington Post reported.

In addition, key defense witnesses suddenly disappeared before the trial began, according to the Post. "Three major witnesses, neighbors Chen Guanghe, Chen Guangdong and Chen Gengjiang, all confessed to us before this retrial that their testimony in the first trial was false because they were tortured by police," chief defense counsel Li Jinsong told the Post.

"They promised us they would come to court to tell the truth. But two of them were missing this morning and one was kidnapped last night by eight unidentified men in front of our hotel. Two other lawyers witnessed it."

Li left the courtroom in protest after the judge refused to grant an adjournment. "Today I asked the judge to delay the retrial because all important witnesses were missing or had been kidnapped," he told Agence France-Presse. "The judge rejected this. I left the court in protest of the serious trampling of respect for the law."

Another lawyer took over, and Li eventually returned. But in a country where dissent is rare, even the spectators began to question to prosecutors' actions.

"I overheard a spectator, who said, 'Whenever the defendant says something crucial, the prosecutor interrupts, saying it's irrelevant. But actually I think this is the most crucial part of the case,'" Chen's brother Chen Guangfu told the Post. "I can feel the mood of the court change in the afternoon."

The verdict is expected in early December. If Chen is convicted again, his lawyers told Agence France-Presse they would file another appeal.