

Chinese petitioners put in secret jails

by UPI

BEIJING - Efforts to prevent Chinese citizens from filing legal petitions against alleged government misdeeds have resulted in a system of unofficial jails, critics say.

Called "black houses," they are used to secretly detain aggrieved citizens, preventing them from embarrassing local officials in front of central government superiors by filing lawsuits alleging perceived bureaucratic ills and official wrongdoing, The New York Times (NYSE:NYT) reported Monday.

Human rights activists and petitioners told the newspaper that under the system, plainclothes security officers and hired thugs abduct petitioners off the streets and hide them in a growing network of unmarked detention centers, some of them nothing more than dank rooms hidden beneath hotels or other structures.

Chinese state media has reported that 10 million petitions have been filed in the last five years on complaints ranging from illegal land seizures to unpaid wages -- but the numbers would have been much higher if not for the black houses, activists told the Times.

Advocates reportedly say more black houses have been established as top Chinese leaders have put more pressure on local politicians to reduce the number of petitions reaching Beijing.

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