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## AP Exclusive: Activist now wants to leave China

By ALEXA OLESEN and MATTHEW LEE, Associated Press

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(05-02) 09:04 PDT BEIJING, China (AP) --

A blind activist said Wednesday that U.S. officials told him that Chinese authorities would have beaten his wife to death had he not left the American Embassy, where he sought sanctuary after fleeing persecution by local officials in his rural town.

A senior U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, denied that the administration had passed on to Chen Guangcheng any threat of violence to his family, but did say that Chen was told that if he stayed in the embassy indefinitely, his family would be returned to their home province.

A shaken Chen, speaking from the hospital room where he was taken after leaving the embassy Wednesday, also said that U.S. officials told him Chinese authorities would send his family back home if he stayed inside. But he added that, at one point, the U.S. officials told him his wife would be beaten to death.

"They said if I don't leave they would take my children and family back to Shandong," Chen told The Associated Press. He said he heard the death threat from an American official whom he could not identify.

The differing accounts could not be immediately reconciled. But the turn in Chen's fate comes after nearly seven years of prison, house arrest and abusive treatment of him and his family members.

His escape from illegal house arrest in eastern China and his flight into the protection of U.S. diplomats in Beijing last week had created a delicate diplomatic crisis for Washington and Beijing. It also threatened to derail annual U.S.-China strategic talks with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton starting Thursday.

Under the agreement that ended the fraught, behind-the-scenes standoff, U.S. officials said China agreed to let Chen and his family be relocated to a safe place in China where he could study at university, and that his treatment by local officials would be investigated.

Chen, 40, said he never asked to leave China and that U.S. officials told him they would accompany him out of the embassy. But after he got to his room in Chaoyang Hospital with his family, he said no U.S. officials stayed behind and that the family is now scared and wants to leave the country.

"I think we'd like to rest in a place outside of China," he said. He later asked that a message be conveyed to U.S. Rep. Chris Smith, a noted critic of China's human rights record: "Help my family and I leave safely."

Clinton said in a statement that Chen's exit from the embassy "reflected his choices and our values" and said the U.S. would monitor the assurances Beijing gave. "Making these commitments a reality is the next crucial task," she said.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry demanded that the U.S. apologize for harboring Chen, investigate how he got into the embassy and hold those responsible accountable.

"What the U.S. side has done has interfered in the domestic affairs of China, and the Chinese side will never accept it," Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said in a statement.

Both sides were eager to resolve Chen's case to clear the way for talks on a U.S.-China agenda crowded with disagreements over trade imbalances, North Korea and Syria. With Chen out of the way, Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and their Chinese counterparts would be able to focus on the original purpose of their two-day talks starting Thursday: building trust between the world's superpower and its up-and-coming rival.

However, leaving Chen in China is risky for President Barack Obama because Washington will now be seen as party to an agreement on Chen's safety that it does not have the power to enforce.

Chen served four years in prison on what supporters said were fabricated charges and was then kept under house arrest with his wife, daughter and mother, with the adults often being roughed by officials and his daughter searched and harassed.

His dogged pursuit of justice and the mistreatment of him by authorities brought him attention from the U.S. and foreign governments and earned him supporters among many ordinary Chinese.

The prison term and abusive house arrest he suffered had long been seen as the work of vengeful local officials that Beijing was either unable or unwilling to stop.

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Associated Press reporters Charles Hutzler and Gillian Wong contributed to this report.

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