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Chen Guangcheng and Gao Zhisheng: Human Rights in China

*Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health,
Global Human Rights, and Int'l Organizations
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2172 Rayburn House Office Building*

Today, we are here to listen and learn from brave men and women from China who have been and are at the forefront of advocating for freedom and human rights and against the tyranny and oppression of the state.

Today we seek advice and counsel as to what can—and must— be done by Congress, the President, and the American people, and all people of goodwill worldwide, to mitigate the hate and gross mistreatment meted out by the government of China against its own citizens.

Today we appeal to Beijing— ease up, respect fundamental human rights and the sanctity of human life and honor your commitments and the rule of law.

Cheng Guangcheng and his equally courageous wife Yuan Weijing have paid, and continue to pay an extraordinary high price for their benign defiance of a dictatorship that violates human rights with impunity and crushes human dignity.

Not only have the Chens endured numbing isolation and unspeakable torture over the course of several years, but now as we all know, in a pathetic display of PRC governmental revenge Chen's nephew Chen Kegui languishes in a Chinese prison while other family members remain at risk. Shockingly, young Chen Kegui has been brutally tortured and threatened, as Guangcheng notes today, with life imprisonment if he appeals his conviction.

Undeterred, Mr. Chen Guangcheng continues to gently raise his clear and consistent voice on behalf of all victims while pushing systemic reform of egregiously flawed political institutions and people who persecute and repress.

Blind since childhood, Mr. Chen bore all the burdens and disadvantages that a disabled person faces in rural China. Confronted with the denial of his rights, he developed an intense interest in law and challenged the local government, winning his case. Hearing of Mr. Chen's success, other individuals in Shandong Province were inspired to seek his legal assistance in securing redress and vindication.

Almost everywhere, corrupt officials made, and continue to make, life miserable for those struggling to survive. Mr. Chen informed many of their rights and helped them seek durable remedies. He helped many to see that the rule of just and compassionate law wasn't just for the privileged few, but for everyone.

Victimized yet unbroken by beatings and torture, 51 months of nightmarish incarceration, preceded by house arrest and followed by 18 months more cut short only by his escape, Chen Guangcheng tenaciously defended Chinese women and babies oppressed by China's draconian one child policy.

Mr. Chen's brilliant mind, indomitable spirit and unimaginable courage exposed pervasive forced abortion, deemed a crime against humanity at the Nuremberg Nazi War Crimes Tribunal, and was relentless in using his self-taught legal skills to protect the innocent.

Unfazed by both the difficulty of the task or the inherent risks, Mr. Chen employed legal strategies to combat this insidious government cruelty towards women and children and argued that his clients in Linyi—and all women in China for that matter—have rights that prohibit such violence. They deserve better.

Chen became, and remains their hero.

It took a blind man to really see the injustice of a population control program that makes most brothers and sisters illegal and to hear the desperate cries of Chinese women.

It took a blind man, the great Chen Guangcheng, to open the eyes of a blind world to these human rights violations systematically inflicted on Chinese women.

Mr. Chen's daring escape to the U.S. Embassy, his miraculous evasion of China's ubiquitous secret police en route is the stuff of legend and superheroes. His dramatic testimony by telephone from a hospital to two emergency hearings I chaired was heard around the world.

Geng He is here today to remind us, and the world, of another brave extraordinary hero, her husband Gao Zhisheng. With great love and a broken heart, this remarkable woman has worked unceasingly to secure the freedom of her husband.

Gao Zhisheng is an attorney who played a leading role among Chinese human rights lawyers that defend those the Chinese government persecutes most harshly, conducting their defense by demanding that the prosecution conform to the law.

Mr. Gao is the quintessential example of a human rights defender.

In 2005, after he took on politically sensitive cases, Mr. Gao wrote open letters to both the National People's Congress and the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, calling for an end to the torture of members of persecuted religious groups. Mr. Gao's license to practice law was subsequently revoked, his law firm shut down, and his family placed under police surveillance. In August, 2006, Mr. Gao was apprehended and then charged with "inciting subversion." He was convicted and given a suspended three-year sentence with five years' probation, effectively placing him under house arrest.

In September 2007, Mr. Gao wrote an open letter to the United States Congress in which he described widespread human rights abuses in China, called "China's birth control policy the largest genocide in the history of mankind" and related the government's harsh treatment of him and his family. He was consequently detained and tortured for 50 days. His captors called him a "traitor," and they warned him he would be killed if he told anyone about being abducted and tortured.

In February 2009, Gao was forcibly taken away from his home in Shaanxi province by public security personnel. He briefly resurfaced only in late March of 2010, more than a year later. During his brief reappearance, however, Mr. Gao gave several interviews to foreign media, disclosing the details of his torture. The next month, Mr. Gao disappeared again.

In a testimony at a China Commission hearing that I chaired on February 14th of last year, Geng He said of her daughter Grace: "Zhisheng's absence has caused my daughter severe emotional anguish. She often dreams that her father is dead."

Geng He added: "My son has tears in his eyes on Father's day...we were forced to endure rumors that the guards had tortured Zhisheng to death."

In late 2011, Gao was secretly transferred to a distant Shaya County Prison in the Aksu district of Xinjiang. He has seen his family only twice in the last 16 months and for only 30 minutes each visit. Police have prohibited family members from asking him any information about himself.

In an account of Mr. Gao's torture, made public by the associated Press in January 2011, Mr. Gao disclosed to a reporter the excruciating details of his detention: "The police stripped Gao Zhisheng bare and pummeled him with handguns in holsters. For two days and nights, they took turns beating him and did things he refused to describe." He recalled, "for 48 hours my life hung by a thread." Authorities reportedly threatened to kill Mr. Gao and to dump his body in a river. And, authorities taunted him by saying "you must forget you're human."

To president Xi, we will not forget Gao Zhisheng. Not now, not ever. We appeal to you to release him.