



May 30, 2012

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

Chen Guangcheng's safe arrival in the United States marks the end of a diplomatic crisis that dominated your recent trip to China. But the larger crisis—China's persecution of public interest lawyers and other activists—is only intensifying. Mr. Chen's relatives and those who assisted his escape remain in grave danger. It is a credit to the United States that Mr. Chen sought protection at the American embassy, and the State Department acted admirably in providing it. Yet it was Mr. Chen's bravery, not the initiative of the United States, that pushed China's mistreatment of activists to the center of the agenda. Now the United States should work to make sure it stays there.

Too often in its dealings with China, the United States has treated human rights as a diversion from "important issues," as American officials keep promising that engagement and economic liberalization will lead to widespread political freedom. Meanwhile the climate for activists deteriorates. According to the State Department's recent report on China, "Efforts to silence political activists and public interest lawyers were stepped up [in 2011], and, increasingly, authorities resorted to extralegal measures including enforced disappearance, 'soft detention,' and strict house arrest, including house arrest of family members, to prevent the public voicing of independent opinions."

China's public interest lawyers like Mr. Chen are using the system to challenge the system—and are paying a terrible price as a result. The government controls bar associations and uses that leverage to pressure lawyers to back away from politically charged cases, like those involving free expression, religious freedom, and the one-child policy. Those courageous lawyers who resist the pressure and continue to champion human rights are likely to encounter the crushing power of the police state. Lawyer Jiang Tianyong tried to visit his friend Mr. Chen in the hospital after he left the U.S. embassy. Police dragged Jiang away and beat him so badly he lost hearing in one ear. China's persecution of lawyers makes a mockery of its contention that it supports the rule of law.

Secretary Clinton, as a former legal aid lawyer, you understand the importance of a fair and independent legal system. In its negotiations with China, the United States should make the end of persecution of lawyers and other activists a priority. We welcomed your recent statement that human rights are "at the heart of our diplomacy" with China.

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You can demonstrate the seriousness of this approach by raising the plight of Chinese lawyers consistently in your discussions with Chinese officials and urging that other senior officials in the Obama administration do the same. In particular, we ask that you direct the U.S. Embassy in Beijing to inquire regularly about the status of Mr. Chen's relatives as well as those who aided Mr. Chen in his daring escape and publicly describe the progress or obstacles to ensuring that no one is punished for helping him.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues. We look forward to continue working with you.

Sincerely,

Elisa Massimino
President and CEO