



June 5, 2013

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write as a diverse group of organizations and individuals to urge you to call for the release of the attached list of prisoners of conscience during your upcoming bilateral summit with President Xi Jinping of China.

The “China 16” leaders whose cases we cite are representative of thousands of men and women in China who, at great cost and peril to themselves and their families, have courageously spoken for the freedom of all – in China and, as a result, for the world at large. By raising the cases of these sixteen – a number we have chosen because the number eight represents good luck in Chinese culture – we believe that you will at least double their chances for freedom, and will greatly enhance the prospects for freedom of similarly situated prisoners of conscience.

The China 16 on whose immediate behalf we write reflect the diversity of groups in China who have been targeted for persecution by their own government: human rights attorneys, pro-democracy activists, Tibetans, Christians, Uyghurs, Falun Gong practitioners, and even a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. They include individuals who have been imprisoned for as long as ten years, and many now suffer from serious health problems while being denied access to adequate treatment or even visitation from family members. Many of the China 16 have close family members living in the United States. In all cases, their imprisonment has been ordered because they are perceived to challenge the Chinese government’s tight grip on power.

According to the State Department’s 2012 Human Rights report, “[r]epression and coercion, particularly against organizations and individuals involved in rights advocacy and public interest issues, are routine.” The report further found that the Chinese Communist Party has committed a wide range of human rights abuses, including “extrajudicial killings, including executions without due process;” “enforced

disappearance and incommunicado detention;” “torture and coerced confessions of prisoners;” “detention and harassment of lawyers, journalists, writers . . . and others;” “a lack of due process in judicial proceedings;” “restrictions on freedom to assemble, practice religion, and travel;” “discrimination against women, minorities, and persons with disabilities;” “a coercive birth-limitation policy that in some cases resulted in forced abortion (sometimes at advanced stages of pregnancy) or forced sterilization;” “trafficking in persons;” and “the use of forced labor, including prison labor.”

Moreover, the State Department has designated China as a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act. In this regard, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom recently recommended that the designation be reissued, noting that “[r]eligious groups and individuals considered to threaten national security or social harmony, or whose practices are deemed beyond the vague legal definition of ‘normal religious activities,’ are illegal and face severe restrictions, harassment, detention, imprisonment, and other abuses.” Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghur Muslims, Protestants, Catholics, and Falun Gong practitioners were identified as widely persecuted religious groups.

Our initiative on behalf of the China 16 is intended to match brave and suffering faces to the abuses now taking place in China against lawyers, academics, writers, businessmen, and religious and political leaders, who carry with them the hope for a more peaceful 21st century for all. As such, each of the China 16 merits a strong voice – not only from civil society and the media but, perhaps most importantly, from you as our President. By giving voice and standing up for the China 16, you will signal to China that its relations with the United States will be greatly affected by how it treats them, and that improved relations with the United States will follow the release of the China 16 and other prisoners of conscience.

The United States has long and successfully made a robust commitment to the human rights of prisoners of conscience a critical component of our foreign policy. Not even the innumerable serious issues that surrounded the Cold War prevented American administrations from directly pressing Soviet leaders to respect the rights of Soviet Jews, Pentecostals, and others -- a priority that enhanced rather than detracted from the satisfactory resolution of the full range of U.S.-Soviet bilateral relations. America’s relationship with China must be no different, and our implacable support of the China 16 is based on the premise that U.S. disinterest in the peaceful advancement of such basic values as liberty and the rule of law profoundly disserves both our values and our interests.

We urge you to raise the cases of the China 16 when you meet with President Xi Jinping at your upcoming summit, and to insist upon their release.

Respectfully,

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