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The Ordeal of China's Liu Xia

Her health declining, the wife of jailed Nobel Peace Laureate Liu Xiaobo is kept under house arrest.

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With the death in custody on March 14 of Chinese dissident Cao Shunli after extended denial of medical care, the world needs to turn its attention to Liu Xia —the wife of Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo —who is at serious risk of suffering the same fate.

The Chinese government placed Liu Xia under house arrest shortly after her husband was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. Since Oct. 11, 2010, she has been detained in her small, one-bedroom apartment in Beijing. She is taken to visit her husband in prison once a month but has no Internet access, telephone, or ability to receive or send mail.

Despite living in the middle of one of the busiest and most populous cities in the world, Liu Xia, a poet and a painter, is cut off and alone. Chinese security officials sit outside her front door and at the entrance to her apartment building.

The Chinese government publicly denies that she is even under house arrest. In response to our complaint to the U.N. Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Beijing claimed that she was under "no legal restriction." The U.N. later found that Liu Xia and her husband, Liu Xiaobo, are being held in violation of international law. The Chinese government has also intensified its pressure on her by sentencing her brother to 11 years in prison for so-called economic crimes.

Under these conditions, her physical and mental health are rapidly declining. In January, Liu Xia, 51, suffered a heart attack and was taken to a hospital, only to be discharged the following day. She is reported to suffer from severe depression. Previously, Liu Xia had refused to seek medical help because she was afraid of further punishment. Her suffering is profound and inhumane. Liu Xia has no ability to challenge her illegal detention.

Nor does it appear the situation could be resolved soon. Under Liu Xiaobo's conviction for "inciting subversion," which was imposed for his writings advocating democratic reform in China, he still has more than five years remaining on his sentence. In today's China, it is apparently a crime to be married to a Nobel Peace Prize laureate and Liu Xia's fate appears to be tied to her husband's.

Beijing has rejected complaints about Liu Xiaobo's detention by claiming he is a "common criminal." Yet there is no logical reason to impose such extraordinary suffering

on his wife.

For a powerful government that demands to be respected on the global stage, its behavior projects profound weakness and insecurity. There is no other way to interpret the extraordinary pressure being placed on one woman, who surely poses no threat to the Chinese governmental system.

Demonstrations to free this innocent woman have been held in Hong Kong, Taiwan and around the world. But it is time for the international community to speak up with one voice and tell Chinese President Xi Jinping "enough!"

First, all foreign ambassadors to China should try to visit Liu Xia in her apartment building, starting with U.S. Ambassador Max Baucus. Given that she is allegedly under no legal restriction, there should be no objection to such visits.

In addition, all foreign leaders visiting Beijing should request to meet with her. It is self-evident that repeated attempts by governments to engage privately with the Chinese government to improve her situation have had no effect. Confronting China directly on its claims that she is not being detained may force the government to yield.

Second, on humanitarian grounds, world governments should press the Chinese government to allow Liu Xia to leave China to seek medical treatment abroad. It is understandable that she has no trust in the doctors who are employed by her jailers. And at this point there is nothing short of leaving China that will enable her to recover and heal—and then return to her homeland.

Finally, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay—who reportedly is trying to visit China before her term ends on Sept. 1—should request to meet Liu Xia and urge Chinese leaders to allow her to leave China.

Repeated efforts to persuade the Chinese government to demonstrate compassion and release Liu Xia have failed. But the international community should take some inspiration from Chinese philosopher Confucius, who said "[w]hen it is obvious that the goals cannot be reached, don't adjust the goals, adjust the action steps."

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