



Freedom Now helps prisoners of conscience

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Ayub Masih was leading a normal life in a small, rural town in Pakistan six years ago. But then his Muslim neighbor accused Masih, a Christian, of violating the country's blasphemy laws, and he was sentenced to die.

Masih spent the next six years living in an 8-by-8 prison cell, wondering if he would ever be free again. Today he is, due in large part to the work of Jared Genser of Bethesda. Genser is the founder and president of Freedom Now, a newly formed nonprofit organization that works to free prisoners of conscience, such as Masih, around the world. The idea behind Freedom Now, which Genser said combines legal, political and public relations efforts to "leverage the release of prisoners of conscience," began after Genser's experience working on a similar case as a student at the University of Michigan Law School two years ago.

While interning in London at the Advice on Individual Rights in Europe Center, Genser read a newspaper article about James Mawdsley, a British national serving a 17-year, solitary-confinement term in a Burma prison after handing out pro-democracy pamphlets. Genser became intrigued and informed his boss of Mawdsley's situation.

Genser and the center drafted a petition to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Switzerland, addressing Mawdsley's imprisonment as a violation of human rights. Upon his return to the United States, Genser employed the assistance of 24 members of Congress, who called for Mawdsley's release.

After many months of work, Mawdsley was freed. Genser traveled to London to meet Mawdsley at Heathrow Airport, and see him reunite with his family.

"It was an incredibly satisfying moment of my life," said Genser, who grew up in Montgomery County. "It brought tears to my eyes. It was a moving experience."

The beginning

Upon his graduation from law school in 2001, Genser, who continues to keep in touch with Mawdsley, returned to Bethesda to concentrate on human rights law and work to free other prisoners of conscience.

He told his friends about his work on the Mawdsley case, and asked for their help in creating an organization. Soon, the Bethesda-based Freedom Now was born. Freedom Now, which operates under a board of nine attorneys, received its first case last fall, the

charges of blasphemy against Ayub Masih. According to Genser, Muslim extremists threatened to kill Masih, his family and his attorneys during his 1996 trial if Masih was not found guilty.

In 2000, Masih's first appeal was denied. Masih had one more chance to appeal to the Supreme Court of Pakistan before he was executed.

But the Pakistani Supreme Court acquitted Masih of all charges two weeks ago. Genser said believes support from the U.S. Congress was the difference between life and death for Masih. "I think the pressure from U.S. senators made Pakistan act more quickly," said Genser, who received word of Masih's release via e-mail. "This is exactly what should have happened a long time ago."

A team of 12 U.S. senators -- including Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.), Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.), Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), Sam Brownback (R- Kan.) and Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) -- sent a letter to Pakistani President Musharraf calling for Masih's release.

Mark Lippert, a foreign policy aide to Leahy, also said he believes the senators' support was influential. "We think the letter had a pretty significant role in Mr. Masih's release," Lippert said.

Masih was arrested after allegedly stating that Christianity was "correct" and advising his Muslim neighbor to read Salman Rushdie's "Satanic Verses." Following Masih's arrest, the entire Christian population was evacuated and the Muslim neighbor took Masih's land.

However, Genser said it was virtually impossible for Masih to have cited Rushdie's book because Masih only speaks Urdu, and the book has not been translated into Urdu. Freedom Now took Masih's case to the United Nations, who determined that Masih was being held in violation of his rights. But Pakistan continued to hold Masih in jail. Now, Masih will leave Pakistan for America as a free man. Genser said Masih plans to live in Northern Virginia.

How Freedom Now works

Freedom Now receives information about potential cases through word-of-mouth and e-mail referrals. Once two-thirds majority of the Freedom Now board approves a case, Freedom Now goes to the client's family to receive permission to work on its. Freedom Now works through a paper litigation process; there is no need for traveling to the country where the prisoner is being detained.

Genser said the United Nations is "a great tool" in working on cases because it can determine whether a country is violating human rights laws. However, the United Nations cannot enforce its decision or punish a country, leaving a much-desired need to give the violating country an extra boost of pressure and shame to free prisoners.

According to the United Nations., the U.N. Commission on Human Rights is the only intergovernmental body that holds public meetings on violations of human rights. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights is responsible for responding and investigating possible human rights violations and raising concerns with the governments of violating countries.

Genser, who works full time at McKinsey and Company, a management consulting firm in Washington, D.C., said that because many of Freedom Now's members and clients are young, the organization runs on what he described as "the idealism of young people and the urgency of young people to change the world quickly." Genser is 30, Mawdsley is 29 and Masih is 31.

On the horizon

Next on Freedom Now's agenda is an American-Egyptian man named Saad Eddin Ibrahim. After receiving a grant from the European Union to research democratization in Egypt, Ibrahim released a video detailing his work. The video revealed his findings that there was not a true democracy in Egypt.

The Egyptian government accused Ibrahim of conspiring to undermine the government. He was arrested and sentenced to seven years of hard labor.

Genser said Freedom Now is working to present Ibrahim's case to the United Nations. As for now, Freedom Now's first case is successfully closed, and Genser said he could not be happier.

"I'm ecstatic," said Genser, who plans on meeting Masih at the airport when he arrives in the United States. "I'm speechless. It's an amazing feeling when you've played a part in freeing someone off death row."