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Do we have to wait 30 years for human rights in China?

By: Fred Hiatt
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When President Obama on Wednesday expressed the hope that "30 years from now, we will have seen further evolution" in China's respect for human rights, I thought about Geng He, who had come to visit me the day before.

Geng He, 43, is a soft-spoken woman who doesn't know whether her husband, Gao Zhisheng, is dead or alive. She knows that over the past five years, he has been repeatedly tortured by Chinese security agents. She knows that he was last seen nine months ago, when some of those agents spirited him away. She's pretty sure that he has not been charged with a crime, but the government will not say where he is.

Gao is not a dissident. He is something China's government apparently finds even more threatening: a lawyer who has sought, while adhering scrupulously to Chinese law, to represent dissidents, members of religious minorities and other victims of Communist Party repression.

"For him, being a lawyer is more than just a profession," Geng told me. "He's tried to educate the public about justice, about the law, and about what's right or wrong. Now, there seems to be no room for someone like that to survive in China."

Geng had hoped that Obama would speak out about her husband's case, both because such attention might help him and because Obama's words could have a big impact more broadly in China. As she wrote in a Post op-ed last year:

"I worry about the next generation of Chinese lawyers. Will disappearances like my husband's deter them from becoming rights defenders? I imagine so. But if the United States were to speak out on my husband's behalf, perhaps this would change."

And also:

"My 8-year-old son, Peter, was surprised to discover last week that President Obama is a lawyer. To him, lawyers are people the government throws into prison, not leaders of the government itself. He asked me whether this meant that President Obama could help free his father. I told him that I hoped so. We are waiting to see."

Obama said in a prepared statement, leading off a White House news conference with Chinese President Hu Jintao, that the two leaders had discussed human rights in their private meeting. I hope those discussions will help Gao as well as other individuals Obama chose not to mention publicly, such as imprisoned Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo and his wife, Liu Xia, who

is under de facto house arrest. When I asked whether Obama had raised Gao's case with China's president, a White House spokesman e-mailed me that "the President referred to the list of names he had raised in the past that included Gao."

What may have a bigger impact is Obama's apparent acceptance, in his off-the-cuff answers, of China's own rationalizations for repression: that "China's at a different stage of development than we are"; that "part of human rights is people being able to make a living and having enough to eat"; and, most of all, that "there has been an evolution in China over the last 30 years. . . . And my expectation is that 30 years from now we will have seen further evolution and further change."

What's alarming is not just that 30 years is a long time to ask Gao's two children to wait. It's the assumption that China is moving, perhaps too slowly but inexorably, in the right direction, because that's how nations evolve as they become more prosperous. The statement uncannily echoes Bush administration comments about Russia over the past decade, as President (now Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin chipped away at freedom there.

Of course, the Bush officials were right that Russia remained freer than it was in the days of the gulag, and Obama is right that China is freer today than in the lunatic days of the Cultural Revolution. But as Freedom House documented in a report last week, the world has become, on balance, less free over the past decade, with China and Russia leading the retrenchment. In China, as the most recent State Department annual report noted, "The government's human rights record remained poor and worsened in some areas."

Since Hu became Communist Party secretary in 2002, in fact, repression has intensified steadily - against Internet freedom, democracy activists, religious liberty, Tibetans and other ethnic minorities, and, perhaps most notably, against lawyers such as Gao who tried to work within the system. Much like Russia in its neighborhood, China also has flexed its muscles to protect autocracies and stymie democracy from advancing in smaller nearby countries such as Burma and Cambodia.

The question is whether the United States and other democracies will acknowledge the dictators' successful push back and seek strategies to counter it. Such strategies would be difficult. They would demand trade-offs against other goals. They might fail.

The alternative - to assume that in 30 years things will be better - comfortably absolves the United States of having to do anything. That removes any risk of failure - but also any chance of helping to steer things Gao's way.