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## The U.S. must speak out against China's offenses

By Geng He

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One year ago today, China kidnapped my husband.

I don't know where he is. I don't know what is being done to him. The only thing I know is why he disappeared: My husband, [Gao Zhisheng](#), defied Beijing by representing people the government finds threatening. As a leading human rights lawyer in China, he fought for those who had been abused by police, those who had their land stolen by the government and those who were persecuted for their religious beliefs.

And now my husband is one of those persecuted people he so vigorously defended. Chinese authorities abducted Zhisheng on Feb. 4, 2009. But they did not officially arrest him and won't tell anyone where they've taken him.

My children and I feared the worst. After nearly a year, a Foreign Ministry official said on Jan. 22 that my husband is "where he should be." I focused on the only thing I could glean with certainty from those ominous words: the indication that the government has my husband in custody. That Zhisheng was alive! At first, this was cause for our family to celebrate. Then we started thinking about what "alive" meant. The last time my husband was arrested, the government tortured him. After he sent a letter to the U.S. Congress in 2007 denouncing human rights abuses in China, the government held him for more than 50 days. His captors electrocuted him. They burned his eyes with lit cigarettes. They stuck toothpicks in his genitals.

My children and I escaped China last year shortly before my husband was abducted. The United States granted us shelter. I fear that the Beijing government took my husband in retaliation for our escape. We knew that if Zhisheng had tried to leave with us, we would never have made it out of China. Now I wait, helpless, certain that my husband is being tortured and wondering whether I should actually hope that he has already been killed.

Over the past several years Zhisheng and I watched the government regularly disbar lawyers and shutter their firms for taking politically sensitive cases. We saw friends and their families beaten, harassed and in some cases imprisoned. We knew it was only a matter of time before the government did the same to us.

That time came in 2006. I cannot adequately explain the panic and intimidation that come with 24-hour government surveillance. That come from knowing that the police could take Zhisheng at any time. Or worrying what government threats were doing to my children. But Zhisheng and I knew he couldn't give in.

I must ask my new country to help my husband; the father of my two children. China won't listen to me. If our relatives who remain in China press the government too hard, they will be arrested. But China will listen to the United States.

Some people here talk of a political hardening in Beijing since the 2008 Olympics. They cite the kidnapping of my husband, or the sentencing of Liu Xiaobo for [his role in Charter 08](#) or of Chen Guangcheng, the blind lawyer, and say that China no longer listens to the United States. It's true that Beijing is silencing more political dissidents than ever. But this is a call to action, not a reason to stand idly by.

The United States cannot allow China to continue to act with impunity, particularly with respect to imprisoning lawyers. China's lawyers are the country's only hope for becoming a one-party state where the rule of law prevails, let alone a true democracy. If China continues to imprison its lawyers, there will be never be change.

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.

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.

*Geng He is the wife of Gao Zhisheng, a human rights lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize nominee who has been held incommunicado by the Chinese government since Feb. 4, 2009.*