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## **China's Rule of Law: Go After the Lawyers**

By Geng He and Chen Guangcheng

*Geng He is the wife of the imprisoned Chinese rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng. Chen Guangcheng is a rights lawyer and former Chinese prisoner of conscience.*

Living in the United States, we now enjoy the right to speak freely. We are in Washington this week exercising that right by telling our stories — the stories of rights lawyers and their families who so often face persecution in the People's Republic of China — to anyone who will listen. But we know that our voices alone will not be enough. As the Chinese government continues to punish those inside the country who stand up for the rights of others, we need the United States and President Obama to stand with us and demand that this repression end.

Our stories are flip sides of the same coin. Geng He sought asylum in the United States after Chinese authorities detained and brutally tortured her husband, the rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng. Chen Guangcheng, a legal activist, was a prisoner of conscience for many years before escaping house arrest last spring. Now in America, he is studying at New York University and advocating on behalf of his relatives, who continue to endure persecution in China because of his activism.

While our stories are different, the theme is the same: The Chinese government targets rights advocates and their families.

Gao, who taught himself the law and rose to prominence representing rural, disenfranchised citizens, came under pressure after taking politically sensitive cases, especially those involving religious minority groups. Even though Gao worked within the system to protect people's rights, the government closed his law firm in 2005 and charged him with inciting subversion in 2006.

The years that followed were terrible. Although the court released Gao after imposing a suspended three-year prison term, Chinese authorities prevented him from leaving his home and cut him off from the outside world. The family was under constant surveillance, with officers even stationed inside their apartment. They were followed everywhere. Eventually, Geng He and their children sought asylum in the United States. Gao stayed in China, knowing that his escape would be impossible.

Even though his sentence had been suspended, Gao was again detained and tortured. In December 2011, after Gao had been "disappeared" for 20 straight months, the Chinese government said it would imprison him for three more years for "seriously violating his probation rules." While the family was relieved to have confirmation that Gao was still alive, their suffering will continue until they can welcome him home.

Like Gao Zhisheng's family, Chen Guangcheng's relatives have suffered merely because of their relationship to an outspoken rights defender. After Chen's escape last spring from illegal house arrest — which followed four years of imprisonment on fabricated charges in response to his legal seeking to end forced abortions and sterilizations resulting from China's coercive "one child" policy — the government set its sights on members of his family who remained in China.

Days after Chen sought refuge at the U.S. Embassy in Beijing last April, police, party officials and government thugs conducted a midnight raid on the home of his brother, Chen Guangfu. After severely beating Guangfu and taking him away, authorities returned armed with clubs and began beating Guangcheng's nephew, Chen Kegui, yelling, "Kill him, kill him." When a party official ordered the thugs to "take him down," Kegui grabbed and swung a kitchen knife in self-defense. Three of the attackers received minor injuries. Kegui was detained, held incommunicado and tortured for six months; in November, after a trial that lasted only three hours, the government sentenced him to more than three years in prison, even though he had been defending himself.

Our stories are just two examples of Chinese authorities acting with impunity and complete disregard for the rule of law. But the attacks on our families are especially worrisome because they show that the government targets not only activists and their families but also the lawyers who have an ethical obligation to defend their clients' rights against government abuses. Gao once said that you cannot be a rights lawyer in China without becoming a rights case yourself. And when these essential advocates and their families are targeted by the government, the international community must speak out on their behalf.

President Obama, in particular, has the opportunity to help our families. We have requested a meeting with the president and hope that we will have the opportunity to tell him our stories in person. As a lawyer, father, husband and the leader of the country where we both now reside and are protected, President Obama is, we believe, the best person to bring our message to the Chinese government: Stop persecuting lawyers. Allow them to safely reunite with their families.