



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Defending Prisoners of Conscience

Thursday, February 15, 2018

2:00 – 3:30 PM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good afternoon. I join my colleague and co-chair Randy Hultgren in welcoming you to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on Defending Prisoners of Conscience. And I join him in welcoming our panel of witnesses, each of whom represents a Commission partner in the Defending Freedoms Project. Your work is crucial for the DFP and so much else, and we deeply appreciate it.

I want to take this opportunity to announce a new partner in the Defending Freedoms Project, Scholars At Risk.

Scholars At Risk is a U.S.-based international network of more than 500 institutions of higher education -- including 16 in my home state of Massachusetts -- whose mission is to protect scholars and promote academic freedom.

The network assists more than 300 threatened scholars worldwide every year, investigates and speaks out against attacks on higher education communities, and empowers scholars and students to expand the space for free expression and inquiry.

The freedom to think is a fundamental right we sometimes take for granted in this country.

But many prisoners of conscience around the world are in jail because they exercised this right. People who think differently cannot help but challenge authority, and that's always a problem for insecure authorities.

So, on behalf of the DFP, I am happy to welcome SAR today as a new coalition member.

I think many of us have probably had the experience of waking up in the morning, reading or listening to the news, and being overwhelmed by how bad it is. The unending capacity of our fellow human beings to inflict harm on one another, and the sheer scale of the resulting misery, can seem overwhelming.

That is why advocating on behalf of prisoners of conscience is so important to me, and so gratifying.

Human rights work is a long game in which a step forward is often followed by two or three back.

But helping an individual who has been unjustly imprisoned, made to live in miserable conditions, perhaps tortured or deprived of food and medical care – a man or woman purposefully degraded and humiliated by some government – giving a person in those conditions hope, maybe improving their conditions, maybe even getting them out – that is a great and sustaining thing to do.

And the Defending Freedoms Project allows Members of Congress to do that good work.

I currently advocate for three prisoners of conscience, the Panchen Lama of Tibet; Nabeel Rajab of Bahrain; and Raif Badawi of Saudi Arabia.

Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was a 6-year-old boy when he was chosen on May 15, 1995 by the Dalai Lama, to be the 11th Panchen Lama. Two days later he and his family were detained by Chinese authorities and no one has heard from him since. Now he is one of the world's longest-held prisoners of conscience.

Today I renew my call to the Chinese government to provide authenticated video-graphic evidence of the Panchen Lama's well-being. The Chinese say the Panchen Lama is living a "normal, happy life." Even if true, I want to hear directly from the Panchen Lama himself.

Nabeel Rajab is the President of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights. Since 2011 he has been repeatedly and unjustly imprisoned for doing things that should never be criminalized, like participating in protests and writing to the *New York Times*.

Last summer Nabeel was sentenced to two years in prison for making "false or malicious" statements about Bahraini authorities. He faces up to 15 additional years in jail for criticizing Bahrain's participation in the Saudi-led war against Houthi rebels in Yemen, and for speaking out about torture in Bahrain's infamous "Jaw" prison.

Nabeel's family has asked me to say today that "*[k]nowing that international voices are speaking up for [Nabeel] gives us great encouragement, and means an enormous amount for Nabeel during the tough days in prison. That Members of Congress are interested and keeping*

his case and those of other political prisoners on the agenda in Washington helps sustain us through the difficult times ...”

The third prisoner I advocate for is Raif Badawi, the Saudi Arabian founder and editor of a blog to religious and political debate. He has been in prison since 2012.

I would like to share a letter from his wife:

“My name is Ensaf Haidar. I am the wife of imprisoned blogger and activist Raif Badawi, the creator of the website Free Saudi Liberals. I grew up in Saudi Arabia, but I now live in Canada, where my children and I fled for refuge after the imprisonment of my husband in 2012. I am addressing this Commission as a woman, a wife, and a mother of three children who believes in her husband’s innocence and desperately longs for his release to safety.

“My husband Raif has been in prison in the city of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia for more than five years. Raif’s alleged crime was the creation of this liberal website, and his freely expressed criticism of the power of the religious establishment in the country. This website encouraged an online debate on basic issues related to freedom of speech and freedom of belief, as well as women’s rights.

“Raif was quickly arrested and charged with “insulting Islam through electronic channels.” He was sentenced on June 17th, 2012 to ten years in prison and up to 1,000 lashes, 50 of which have already been carried out publicly. A committee of physicians determined that his injuries were too serious to carry out the other 950 lashes at that time. Words cannot describe the horror I felt as I watched my husband whipped over and over again through videos posted online. Every second I spend away from him I fear for his life.

“Raif still has almost five more years of his sentence to serve in prison, and 950 more lashes on his back to bear. He was sentenced to an additional ten-year travel ban after completing his prison term, meaning that he will not be able to see our children, who live with me in Canada, until the year 2032. The next time Raif will see our eldest daughter, she will be 28 years old. The last time she saw him she was only eight.

“For the past five years, there has been an international outcry for Raif’s freedom. Amnesty International has labeled Raif’s treatment and imprisonment a crime against humanity, and their petition for Raif’s freedom has received over 800,000 signatures. Eighteen Nobel laureates have signed a letter urging academics from Saudi Arabia to condemn my husband’s flogging. He has received awards from the European Parliament, Reporters Without Borders, and many other international organizations.

“Today, I am incredibly thankful that Congressman McGovern has adopted Raif as part of the Defending Freedoms Project. The Congressman’s public-facing advocacy on behalf of Raif, and his repeated letters with officials in Saudi Arabia urging the government to release him

has helped keep repeated pressure and public attention on Raif's case. The Defending Freedoms Project has inspired a new hope in me that Raif will soon be released from his unjust imprisonment into the welcoming arms of his family, who have waited many years to embrace him.

"Thank you Congressman McGovern, Congressman Hultgren, and the other Members of Congress who form the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for taking up Raif's cause.

"My husband is not a criminal. He is a writer, an independent thinker, a visionary, and an activist. He deserves freedom, and our children deserve to grow up with a father.

"With hope,

"Ensaf Haidar"

Let me just say in closing that what we do as Members of Congress to protect and defend human rights matters for our country and for people all over the world. The work we do through the Defending Freedoms Project matters for individuals who are thrown into prison for no reason other than the malfeasance of their "governments."

I thank all my colleagues who are currently advocating for a prisoner of conscience through the Defending Freedoms Project – and I encourage all other Members to take on this important work.

Thank you and I yield back.