

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing: Defending Prisoners of Conscience
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Chairman McGovern, Chairman Hultgren, and Members of the Commission, it's an honor to testify today.

The Role of Freedom House: Emergency Assistance for Human Rights Defenders

Freedom House is a 75 year old nonpartisan organization dedicated to the expansion of democracy and freedom around the world through a unique combination of research, advocacy, and on-the-ground programming in highly restrictive environments. In the 10 years since our emergency assistance programs began, we have supported more than 3000 human rights defenders, members of religious minorities, and civil society groups in more than 100 countries at their moment of greatest need. We have been able to help them receive medical treatment, obtain legal counsel, support their families when they have been in prison, given them means to resume their critical work, and in many cases saved their lives.

Freedom House Research: Democratic Declines and Authoritarian Advances

Unfortunately, need for both emergency and long-term assistance is increasing. Our research has documented the 12th straight year of declines in global democracy, including

in established democracies, and a corresponding and deeply troubling rise in antidemocratic and authoritarian practices.^{1,2} Space for civil society continues to shrink as free and fair elections, the rights of minorities, freedom of the press, and the rule of law come under attack. Modern authoritarian leaders employ nuanced strategies of repression.³ They exploit open societies, repress opposition without completely crushing it, and flout the rule of law “while maintaining a plausible veneer of order, legitimacy, and prosperity.”⁴

Prisoners of Conscience: a Global Problem

All of these factors have resulted in an increasing number of prisoners of conscience around the world. The Commission’s Defending Freedoms Project highlights prisoners in 17 countries, including China.

It is impossible to have a hearing about prisoners of conscience without mentioning China, home to one of the largest populations of prisoners in the world, with individuals detained not only in formal prisons but in a variety of extralegal detention facilities. Documentation is difficult due to the sheer volume of cases and the secrecy surrounding many of them, but Freedom House estimates tens of thousands in detention. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China documents 1,414 political prisoners in their database, and Dui Hua has an even more extensive database of 7,506.^{5,6} These are just the tip of the iceberg. The number of prisoners of conscience appears to have skyrocketed over the past year with the emergence of political indoctrination centers in Xinjiang. Radio Free Asia estimates that

¹ *Freedom in the World 2018*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>

² *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians, 2017*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/breaking-down-democracy-goals-strategies-and-methods-modern-authoritarians>

³ *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians, 2017*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/breaking-down-democracy-goals-strategies-and-methods-modern-authoritarians>

⁴ *Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians, 2017*, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/breaking-down-democracy-goals-strategies-and-methods-modern-authoritarians>

⁵ <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/political-prisoner-database>

⁶ https://duihua.org/wp/?page_id=195

more than 120,000 Uyghurs are detained.⁷ As Freedom House noted last year in our report on religious freedom in China, “religious prisoners form the largest contingent of prisoners of conscience.”⁸ Yao Guofu and Liang Xin, a married couple jailed since December 2015, are a perfect example. Each is serving 4.5 years in prison for disseminating materials about the persecuted Falun Gong spiritual group.

The problem of prisoners of conscience reaches far beyond the countries highlighted thus far by the Defending Freedoms Project. There are around 60,000 political prisoners in Egypt,⁹ including human rights defender Hanan Badr el-Din¹⁰ and 233 at the last count in Venezuela, including opposition leader Leopoldo Lopez.¹¹ In Turkey, tens of thousands were rounded up in the purge that followed the coup-attempt, including 157 journalists, American pastor Andrew Brunson (who is noted as a political prisoner by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom),¹² Amnesty International Turkey chair Taner Kiliç,¹³ and civil society activist Osman Kavala.¹⁴ In Russia, Oyub Titiyev, the director of the human rights group Memorial, has been jailed on trumped-up charges since January 9 in retaliation for his work.¹⁵ The European Parliament has called for his release.¹⁶

Recommendations for Congress

The United States remains the most powerful nation in the world, and the United States Congress remains the most powerful legislative body in the world. As such, staffers and

⁷ <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/detentions-01222018171657.html>

⁸ *The Battle for China's Spirit: Religious Revival, Repression, and Resistance Under Xi Jinping*, 2017, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/china-religious-freedom>

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/urgent-actions/urgent-action-prisoner-of-conscience-denied-vital-medication-egypt-ua-129-17/>

¹¹ <https://foropenal.com/en/presos-politicos/#listado-presos-politicos>.

¹² <http://www.uscirf.gov/pastor-andrew-brunson>

¹³ <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/taner-kilic>

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/03/opinion/osman-kavala-erdogan-turkey.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-lawmakers-demand-release-of-activist-jailed-in-chechnya/29027513.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.rferl.org/a/eu-lawmakers-demand-release-of-activist-jailed-in-chechnya/29027513.html>

Members have a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous opportunity: you remain one of the most crucial voices for prisoners of conscience around the world.

1. Use your voice!

Use your voice! You can speak out for prisoners of conscience, both publicly and privately. It is obvious, but bears repeating: adopt a prisoner from the Lantos database. Give a speech, write an op-ed, hold a rally with family members, meet with the country's ambassador in Washington, travel to the region, withhold foreign assistance. If you do not feel you can take action publicly, remember that behind the scenes interventions can be effective. Civil society groups working to assist prisoners of conscience can help you by providing relevant information and draft materials.

2. Be creative.

Be creative in your efforts to advocate for prisoners. All of us should reject the notion that constituents will not care about prisoners of conscience. I worked for Members from the Midwest, and plenty of constituents not only cared about these issues, they loved the passion Members showed on this topic. If you are from a district with active churches, mosques, or synagogues, adopt an imprisoned person of faith and partner with believers to highlight the case. If you are from a university town, champion an academic. If a large number of constituents share a foreign heritage, champion a prisoner from that country.

Get beyond thinking of prisoner adoption as simply churning out one minute speeches. The Lantos Commission partnered on an excellent online tool that can be found at HumanRightsontheHill.org, listing different ways Members can engage on human rights issues. Many of the ideas would work for prisoners of conscience.

And, if a particular foreign official is known to have tortured or abused a prisoner of conscience, submit the name of that individual to the State Department and Treasury Department for sanction under laws like the *Global Magnitsky Act* and the *International Religious Freedom Act*.



3. Be relentless.

Finally, be relentless. A single speech is unlikely to secure a prisoner's release. Raise these prisoners continually with the foreign government in question, with the U.S. government, with partner nations, with the American public. One of the proudest moments in my professional career came when I learned about the release of a couple whose cause I had helped support. Their daughter had come to DC several times and worked with us and other human rights groups to meet with Members of Congress. And these Members, including Congressman McGovern, worked with civil society. Together we were relentless, together, using private calls, private letters, public letters, press releases, briefings, hearings, protests, and even the appropriations process, to exert pressure on the offending government. It took 17 months, but we finally got her parents out. They are now reunited as a family. It can be done.

Conclusion

Democracy and fundamental freedoms are not side issues. They are the heart and soul of statecraft. Without robust democracy where rule of law is upheld and the rights of minorities are respected, national security and economic prosperity suffer. Prosperity and security are strongest where humanity is free to flourish.

So the prisoner of conscience languishing in a dark, dirty cell halfway around the world DOES matter to the United States. They matter not only because the values on which this nation was founded require us to care about every human life, but also because we live in an interconnected world. Like it or not, economic problems and unrest in one country have a ripple effect to others.

I consider one of the biggest responsibilities of my job to convey to you what I hear from the activists we work with. As we face rising authoritarianism and other threats to democracies, congressional advocacy is more important than ever. There are people right now, at this very moment being tortured, being killed, because they won't back down. They

will persist in their religious belief. They will continue their peaceful dissent. They will speak truth to power. These human rights advocates are the best hope for the future we all want.

These are the people who, if allowed to, will create the stable democracies that protect and respect human life, that will partner on security issues, that will engage in trade that generates economic growth, that will promote human flourishing. They are the change-makers and we want them to win.

So, on behalf of the human rights defenders I am privileged to work with and for, I implore you – use your voice. Take action for the hundreds of thousands of prisoners of conscience around the world. Adopt and advocate for the people highlighted in the Defending Freedoms Project and discussed here today.

Thank you.