



December 6, 2018

Celebrating 10 Years of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's Defending Freedoms Project

10 years ago, Representatives Frank Wolf and Jim McGovern, the co-chairs of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission (TLHRC) came up with a plan to re-energize Congress' commitment to and engagement on human rights in a profoundly direct and powerful manner: they launched the Defending Freedoms Project. The initiative would pair Members of Congress (MOC) with specific Prisoners of Conscience (POCs) and those MOCs would advocate for the release of that individual.

The Lantos Commission was already a respected and influential body in Congress and a powerful voice on human rights outside of it. TLHRC hearings were shared on social media, posted on YouTube or became fodder for strident press releases from governments that were the target of the Commission's attention. Within the rights community, the Commission came to most consistently embody the hoped-for leadership on human rights that was willing to challenge abuses against the Uighurs in Xinxiang or the SPLM based government's war crimes in South Sudan and call out shortcomings in any US response to those abuses.

When the Defending Freedoms Project was launched people paid attention. For Congress, the project empowered members of Congress to be personally invested in specific cases and educate their colleagues. It encouraged MOCs to use their voice and influence to highlight cases that were not headline news. For prisoners, it connected individuals facing the full weight of government repression with the attention and support of the US Congress. It sent a powerful message to the abusive government that

this prisoner in question had not been forgotten, that they had friends and that human rights and this specific case mattered to the United States. Over 40 members of Congress took up cases, some taking on more than one and it made a difference

On the prisoner side the initiative helped release Prisoners of Conscience in [Azerbaijan](#), [Bahrain](#), [Belarus](#), [Burma](#), [China](#), [Cuba](#), [Ethiopia](#), [India](#), [Indonesia](#), [Iran](#), [Kazakhstan](#), [Pakistan](#), [Russia](#), [Saudi Arabia](#), [Sudan](#), [Syria](#), [Swaziland](#), [Tunisia](#), [Turkey](#), [Uzbekistan](#) and [Vietnam](#).

As the 115th Congress draws to close Amnesty International USA would like to thank the co-chairs, staff and fellows of the Commission who over the past 10 years consistently make the impossible happen and managed to make it look easy in the process. Amnesty International USA looks forward engaging the 116th Congress in the work of the Defending Freedom Project.