



Defending freedoms

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December 14, 2012 04:44 AM EST

Gao Zhisheng is one of the most respected human rights lawyers in China. In the course of defending activists and religious minorities and documenting human rights abuses, he has handled key cases, including those of the Falun Gong and Christians in Xinjiang.

Nabeel Rajab is a prominent human rights activist in Bahrain who has called for and participated in peaceful protests against the government.

Along with their leadership in support of human rights, they share something: These courageous individuals have been jailed and denied fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other internationally recognized human rights standards and law.

They cannot speak for themselves, but today we are speaking for them and others in order to pierce the darkness and shatter their silencing.

Our efforts are part of a new Defending Freedoms Project launched last week by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the U.S. House of Representatives, in conjunction with the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and Amnesty International USA. Through this effort, members of Congress will stand in solidarity with imprisoned human rights defenders from across the world they have selected to support. Gao Zhisheng and Nabeel Rajab are the first prisoners to be selected and will be followed by others. We want these human rights defenders to know that they are not forgotten. We want to shine a light on the laws and policies that led to their imprisonment. And we want to hold their governments accountable.

China disbarred Gao Zhisheng, tortured him repeatedly since 2006, concealed his whereabouts for nearly 20 months and imprisoned him in Shaya County Prison in northwest China.

Nabeel Rajab languishes in al-Jaw prison in Bahrain. While already serving a three-month sentence in a case relating to a tweet he posted, he recently was given a three-year jail sentence for taking part in anti-government protests. He is awaiting a decision on his appeal.

Unfortunately, others in China and Bahrain face similar treatment that violates international standards.

China's government jails and persecutes people for peacefully expressing their views, advocating for democratic reform and human rights, defending the rights of others, and

holding religious beliefs or conducting religious activities not sanctioned by the state. Conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims remain dire, as does the fate of hundreds of detained unregistered Protestants, dozens of unregistered Catholic clergy, and detained Falun Gong adherents. Last year alone, more than 100 human rights defenders disappeared, or were tortured, detained, stripped of legal licenses, or sentenced to prison terms, as authorities tried to preempt any political unrest similar to the popular Arab Spring uprisings. The systematic targeting of human rights lawyers and activists belonging to the wei quan (rights defense) movement has gone on for many years.

Like China, Bahrain's government fears popular dissent, and has stood in the way of people peacefully demonstrating: dismissed and expelled workers and students for engaging in political activities; arbitrarily arrested, detained and tortured thousands, including medical personnel and human rights activists — some of whom have died as a result; and restricted freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, and some religious practices. Discrimination on the basis of gender, religion, nationality and sect persists — especially against the Shia Muslim population. Last year, the Bahraini government demolished 53 Shi'a religious structures without giving required notice or allowing judicial review prior to the demolitions. Multiple human rights groups allege that Shi'a individuals were harassed, interrogated, and arrested for returning to some of the destroyed sites to pray or retrieve religious materials.

Eli Wiesel once said, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented."

For the sake of Gao Zhisheng, Nabeel Rajab and other individuals across the globe, we dare not be silent. Let every person of conscience join us in support of human freedom, decency and dignity.

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