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October 19, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

We write to request that you meet with leaders of independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on your upcoming trip to Beijing. Directors of NGOs and independent rights advocates are likely to be followed, threatened, or placed under house arrest during your visit. A meeting with you would give them a measure of political shelter.

As you probably know, in recent years, China has begun to tolerate a few small NGOs that work on such issues as HIV/AIDS, rule of law and the environment. However, authorities remain highly suspicious of civil society, which has developed despite heavy restrictions. Many are unable to register legally, face frequent shutdowns of their websites, and deal on a daily basis with the threat of police raids and harassment.

We work closely with the directors of a number of independent AIDS NGOs in China. They are moderate and peaceful lawyers and community activists, doing work not too different from your own community work in Chicago – they are mobilizing communities to defend their rights to housing and healthcare. Yet on every major state visit from the U.S. to China, many of these community leaders are threatened, followed and detained.

During major national holidays and state visits, police routinely sweep the Beijing streets of undesirables and warn rights advocates not to leave home, in order to prevent their speaking out or protesting in public. A few examples:

- In October, a director of a health rights group in Henan Province was placed under house arrest for China's National Day celebrations and prevented from traveling to an international conference. Police also detained director of legal aid center Open Society Initiative, Xu Zhiyong, as part of the extensive preparations for the National Day celebrations, and warned others not to leave home;
- During Senator of State Clinton's visit to Beijing in February, more than a dozen activists and NGO directors were followed by police, threatened, or placed under house arrest, including Zeng Jinyan, blogger and wife of imprisoned AIDS activist Hu Jia.
- Numerous activists around China were threatened or detained in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and warned to leave town until the Olympics were over;
- Religious rights activist Hua Huiqi was detained to prevent his meeting President Bush at a Beijing church in 2008;
- During President Bush's visit to China in 2005, police detained housing rights activist Ni Yulan.

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As a Nobel laureate, the world looks to you as a beacon of human rights. While scolding China on its human rights record has rarely borne fruit, a meeting with NGO directors would signal that it's time for Chinese authorities to treat their own civil society leaders with greater respect. And in the long run, Chinese policy and law will benefit from consultation with civil society.

Please give your support to civil society leaders who are working within the existing system, and help to make them stronger.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sara Davis".

Sara L.M. Davis, Ph.D.  
Executive Director