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The Disappearance of Liu Xiaobo's Wife

Beijing maintains that Liu Xia is 'free,' but it's clear the authorities have detained her illegally.



Liu Xia, wife of 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, in Beijing in 2012 with a photo of her and her husband. Photo: Ng Han Guan/Associated Press

By Jared Genser

After the July 13 death of Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo, his wife Liu Xia disappeared. The Chinese government claims she is “free,” but even her closest friends are unable to reach her. It’s clear that the authorities have detained her illegally.

As Ms. Liu’s counsel, I filed a formal complaint to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, asking for urgent intervention. The world must act quickly to secure her release.

At the time of his death, Liu Xiaobo was serving an 11-year sentence for “inciting subversion to state power,” imposed in December 2009, primarily for his role as the co-author and first signatory onto Charter 08, a pro-democracy manifesto that advocated multiparty democracy. He was awarded the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize in absentia.

I was hired by Ms. Liu to help her family in mid-2010, a few months before the announcement of the Nobel Prize. As that date approached, we discussed if it made more sense for her to stay in China or fight for his freedom from abroad if he were to win the prize. Despite my concerns about restrictions to her liberty if he won, she told me unequivocally, “My place is in China with my husband.”

Within a week of the prize announcement, the authorities created a permanent security cordon around Ms. Liu. She was forced to live under strict house arrest in her one-bedroom apartment in Beijing. She was allowed to visit her husband once a month, but had no access to the internet, couldn’t send or receive mail and couldn’t freely use a telephone. A few times journalists broke through security and short videos showed her in severe distress.

To keep Ms. Liu quiet, the Chinese authorities made up charges against her brother Liu Hui. He was sentenced to 11 years in prison for alleged economic crimes and served two years of his sentence.

Viewed briefly being taken by security officials to observe the trial of her brother, Ms. Liu was asked by a journalist why she had been allowed out of the house. “They want to break one leg, then the other. I tell myself to stand straight, don’t be afraid,” she said.

“Is it a crime to be Liu Xiaobo’s wife?” Ms. Liu asked. The Chinese government’s behavior shows that the answer is yes.

Both of Ms. Liu's parents, who were allowed to visit her every month during her earlier years in detention, died while she was under house arrest. It's no wonder she suffered severe depression, had a heart attack and otherwise saw her own health deteriorate dramatically.

Throughout this time, the Chinese government claimed to the U.N. that Ms. Liu was "under no legal restriction." That was in one cynical respect true; there is no legal house arrest in China, meaning she has been held illegally.

The U.N. subsequently found both Lius were being detained in violation of international law and demanded their immediate release.

Ms. Liu's grief now is undoubtedly profound. She and her husband were famously in love and deeply bonded. Liu Xiaobo once wrote to Ms. Liu, "Even if I were crushed into powder, I would still use my ashes to embrace you."

Despite the death of her husband, the security cordon hasn't lifted. Ms. Liu has now been disappeared, with no end to her detention in sight.

At the U.S. Congress, legislation introduced by Sen. Ted Cruz proposes to rename the street in front of the Chinese Embassy "Liu Xiaobo Plaza." This has top Chinese officials upset. Apparently it frustrates their efforts to erase Liu Xiaobo from the world's collective memory.

Unless Ms. Liu and her brother are allowed to travel abroad, Congress should pass the bill quickly and send it to President Trump to sign into law. All democracies that claim to care about human rights should follow this example.

Ms. Liu has suffered for marrying an extraordinary man. She deserves freedom from fear and to have peace and tranquility for the rest of her life.

Mr. Genser is founder of Freedom Now and pro bono counsel to Liu Xia.