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US must insist on Chen Guangcheng's safety

The US must guarantee Chen Guangcheng's safety and insist China protect the rights of the activist and his family, Amnesty International said amid reports the Chinese activist escaped from illegal house arrest last week into American diplomatic protection in China.

"It is time for Chen and his family to be allowed to live a free and normal life, including remaining in China if that is their wish," said Catherine Baber, Amnesty International's Asia Pacific deputy director.

"This is also a real test of the US government's oft stated commitment to respecting the human rights aspirations of citizens worldwide."

"Ultimately, if Chen and his family's desire to live a safe and "normal life" can only be achieved outside China, that will be a real indictment of the Chinese government's commitment to the rule of law and protecting the human rights of all citizens."

Chen is best known for exposing forced abortion and sterilisation practices in Linyi County, Shandong Province, and for seeking legal redress for the victims. He also gave legal support to many others whose rights have been violated, including farmers forcibly removed from their land without due process or compensation.

When Chen escaped last week he had been under illegal house arrest for 19 months. His home had become a virtual prison for him, his wife and daughter.

After his escape, Chen Guangcheng issued a video in which he confirmed the horrendous treatment that he and his family had experienced over months.

His wife, Yuan Weijing had once been wrapped up in a blanket and kicked for hours by plainclothed security forces. His daughter was followed to and from school every day by three plainclothed police; her bags were thoroughly searched each time she left the house.

During his time under house arrest, Chen was prevented from seeking medical treatment. The couple were also prevented from meeting their wider family, including their young son, who lives elsewhere with an aunt so that he can attend school.

In the video Chen Guangcheng expresses fear for his family's safety including his wife Yuan Weijing, and his daughter, both of whom he fears are still captive and could become targets for "revenge" by the authorities.

In two days the US and China will be holding their Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing, dubbed a "whole government" affair. Development of the rule of law in China and reliable routes to justice for Chinese citizens is a strategic priority of global significance.

The US and other governments should be insisting not only on the protection of Chen Guangcheng's human rights, but also for the immediate release of all individuals detained in connection with his escape.

Reports suggest that his brother Chen Guangfu is still in detention, as is He Peirong, who reports she met Chen after his escape and drove him to Beijing. Chen's nephew, Chen Kegui, who fled when police came to his home after Chen's escape, is still unaccounted for.