

Video: Marco Rubio Speaks Out on Christian Persecution in China

During the 30-hour post-cloture debate on the confirmation of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) gave an impassioned speech about religious liberty that was largely ignored by the mainstream media.

But the group China Aid wants you to hear about that speech, because it's an issue the organization deals with on a daily basis.

Rubio said:

Mr. President, I know that we are in the middle of an important debate about a topic of our education in our schools. And one of the topics I hope young Americans will learn more about is the state of affairs across the world when it comes to human rights.

We are a vibrant society engaged in a heated debate, as we often have throughout our history about items of political matters. If you look here today, there are people standing up to speak on different side of an issue. You see the Republican Party today controls the White House, the Senate and the House. And yet, you have people with the freedom in this country to be able to stand up and oppose that. We've seen that across the country and demonstrations and then speeches and then all sorts of other protected speech. We're very fortunate, we're very blessed, to live in a nation with those freedoms.

But that's not the case all over the world. And I wanted to take this opportunity in the midst of all this debate and discussion about an important topic—the nomination before

the Senate--to remind people that despite our differences on these issues we are truly blessed to be able to live in a country where opposing the party in power does not mean you go to jail. As I have been doing for some time now, I wanted to come this evening and highlight yet another example of human rights abuses that are taking place in a very important part of the world.

For the past couple of years, my office and I have been highlighting human rights cases through our social media campaign—we call it #ExpressionNOTOppression.

The goals of this are to raise awareness about these cases and the individuals who are suffering at the hands of these repressive governments. We know through history that some of the oppressed people ... we may think that these floor speeches matter, we may not think that mentioning here in this forum matters. But it does to them because one of the first things oppressors tell them is that the world has forgotten about you and you don't matter anymore. That is one of the first reasons why we come is to raise awareness and to let them know we know their names and we know their story and we will continue to speak out on their behalf.

The second is to show their families and their loved ones that elected officials like me, here in the United States, have not forgotten them—because we know that tyrants, as I said, like to tell political prisoners that they are alone in their struggle.

And the third is to call for action—whether it's for the administration to make their causes their priorities too, or to call on these governments to release these individuals.

And there is one more reason why I think this effort again, #ExpressionNOTOppression, is important; because as well as all the good work being done here on both sides of the aisle in defense of human rights—promotion of democracy and the

defense of God-given freedoms like religious freedom, and freedom of the press, and free speech which we celebrate here even in this debate, they have to continue to be a pillar of our foreign policy. And so I hope that these cases we highlight bring that guiding principle to light.

Today, I wanted to discuss the cases of two Chinese political prisoners, whose courageous wives I had the opportunity to meet last week when they visited here in Washington, D.C. These women personally requested that I intervene on behalf of their husbands, pressing the Chinese government to immediately and unconditionally release them – and in the case of one, to account for his whereabouts.

But perhaps just importantly, they urged me that I press our own State Department to prioritize these cases diplomatically in the hopes that these families could be reunited in the not-too-distant future. And so I come here to today to urge our now, new Secretary of State, Mr. Tillerson, to prioritize the release of these men in his diplomatic engagement with China.

In the coming weeks, I also expect we'll have a chance to hear from the president's nominee to be the United States Ambassador to China, Governor Branstad of Iowa. When he comes before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for his confirmation hearing, I will bring up these cases and others and urge him to make their freedom a priority of his work if confirmed.

Jiang Tianyong is a 45-year old lawyer. He was disbarred by the Chinese government because of his vigorous human rights advocacy, including his representation of blind legal advocate Chen Guangcheng, fellow rights lawyer Gao Zhisheng, Falun Gong practitioners and other human rights cases. Despite the risks of this work, he has been steadfast in his support of the families and of their rights to lawyers and legal advocates caught up in China's sweeping nationwide

crackdown on the legal community in July 2015, which ensnared roughly 250 lawyers and activists.

Jiang's wife indicated, consistent with a spate of recent media stories, that his family and friends lost contact with him in late November of last year. That's when a Chinese state-controlled newspaper reported he had been detained for a series of trumped-up charges.

His wife has received no formal confirmation of his precise whereabouts, and to date, he has been denied access to a lawyer of his choosing. Even more troubling is that this is entirely legal under China's laws—even though it violates all international norms of justice. Under China's own laws, authorities may hold him, or anyone, for up to six months without informing his family where he is held and without allowing him to access a lawyer, conditions that the United Nations Committee against Torture has found places "detainees at a high risk of torture." Indeed, reports over the past months about four other human rights lawyers provide detailed information about the Chinese authorities' use of torture to extract "confessions" and impose unbearable psychological pressure.

All of these realities underscore that China remains a country of rule by law. Congressman Chris Smith of New Jersey and I co-chair the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, which found in our 2016 Annual Report that "... the Chinese Communist Party has continued to reject the notion that the rule of law should supersede the Party's role in guiding the functions of the state..." As such, lawyers, advocates, dissidents and others often find themselves in the Party's crosshairs, persecuted under the law rather than protected by it, and they have no recourse for justice.

A second Chinese individual I want to highlight today is lawyer Tang Jingling, who has also been disbarred for his rights advocacy. He first gained prominence as a lawyer

working on cases related to village compensation, corruption and also by representing activists. In January of last year, he was convicted of “inciting subversion of state power” – that’s a charge – and sentenced to five years in prison. He was first detained in May 2014 on suspicion of “picking quarrels and provoking troubles”–just imagine that: picking quarrels and provoking troubles is a crime in China. This happened by the way during the lead up to the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square protests–when the Chinese government worked desperately to wipe out any discussion or memory of this historically brutal crackdown. In reality, all Tang and other activists did was participate in a nonviolent disobedience movement seeking legal and social reform in China.

Following his conviction, Tang eloquently wrote, “Inside the grand edifice of the court, we can see stately and ornate furnishings and decorations, and we can see the government employees in dignified attire. But we cannot see the law and we can definitely not see justice.”

He continues, movingly speaking of the faith that has sustained him in the midst of injustice: “The Holy Bible has a passage that reads: ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.’ Today, we have been pronounced guilty, thrown in prison, separated from our families, and have endured humiliation and difficulties–and I am far from being able to convince or prove to others how these tribulations could have become my blessings. But God’s will is inevitably difficult to understand. I often pray and ask him to give me more strength, so that I may persevere until the moment of revelation. I dare say, in 2011, while in a secret jail, and now in detention, almost every day I have passed has been calm and fulfilling. I have never lost my direction.”

The courage and conviction of these men should be an inspiration to us all – an inspiration which should propel

us to act. And I would add a reminder again about how blessed and fortunate we are to live by the grace of God in a nation where we have the freedom to speak, to object, to state our views without fear of the circumstances and the consequences these brave men now face. The Chinese people yearn for the protection of their most basic human rights, and bravely stand with their fellow marginalized and oppressed countrymen. They are China's greatest asset, not its biggest threat, as the government and Communist Party wrongly believes. Any government, any government, which views its own people with such fear and hostility will, as has often been said, find itself on the wrong side of history.

And so I hope more of my colleagues in this body, in the House and especially in the administration, will join their voices in support of these political prisoners, and all who languish in jails, in prisons and in gulags simply because they want a better life, because they want a say in their future, and have bravely made those aspirations clear.

Rubio's speech followed a meeting facilitated by China Aid with the wives of both men. Rubio also spoke at the group's annual meeting at the Library of Congress last month. The organization released the following statement about Rubio's involvement on Monday:

"China Aid works with officials such as Rubio in order to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians and promote religious freedom, human rights and rule of law." {eoa}