

Blind Chinese Activist May Come to US



Reuters

Chen Guangcheng speaks with his wife, Yuan Weijing, and children in a Beijing hospital on May 2. To his right is U.S. Ambassador Gary Locke.

This is IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English.

Chen Guangcheng was born in a poor village in eastern China during the country's Cultural Revolution. He gained international recognition as a human rights lawyer. Now, the "blind barefoot lawyer" is involved in a diplomatic incident that has caught the attention of the world.

On April twenty-second, Chen Guangcheng escaped house arrest in his home village in Shandong Province. He fled to the United States Embassy in Beijing. He remained there for six days as diplomats discussed his case.

His escape came at a sensitive time. Officials from both countries were preparing for the two-day U.S.-China Strategic Economic Dialogue. The two sides use the yearly meeting to discuss security and economic issues. But, human rights suddenly became important. On Thursday, in her opening comments, American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted:

HILLARY CLINTON: "As part of our dialogue, the United States raises the importance of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Because we believe all governments have to answer to our citizens' aspirations for dignity and the rule of law and that no nation can or should deny those rights."

Chen Guangcheng had been returned to Chinese officials in Beijing the day before the Dialogue started. The move shocked activists and some American lawmakers. Representative Chris Smith of New Jersey held a Congressional hearing. He asked questions about the safety of the activist and people close to him.

CHRIS SMITH: "What happens if Chen or any member of his family suffers retaliation? Where is Chen's nephew, Chen Kegui? What happens now with He Peirong, the courageous young woman who drove Chen to safety?"

On Friday, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said the activist could request permission to leave the country.

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Spokesperson Liu Weimin said Chen Guangcheng could seek a student visa "just like any other Chinese citizen." At this time, it is unclear if his family would also be able to go with him. But at least one American university has offered him the opportunity to study.

Chen Guangcheng's story is extraordinary. He became blind as a child. And he struggled to receive higher education. In the nineteen nineties, he became interested in legal issues after learning that he was being taxed illegally. He continued to study the law on his own.

Then he began helping others. A Chinese reporter said the activist helped about three thousand people. But his activities angered local officials. He would often carry cases to higher and higher authorities, even to the capital, Beijing. Increasingly he faced threats and beatings.

In two thousand six, Chen Guangcheng was tried in connection with exposing abuses of China's one-child policy. He found women were being forced to end their pregnancies, often in violence ways. That same year, he was named to TIME magazine's list of one hundred people who are changing the world.

After two trials, he was sentenced to four years in prison. Chen Guangcheng and his wife Yuan Weijing have two children, a son and a daughter.

And that's IN THE NEWS in VOA Special English. I'm Steve Ember.