

Statement at 32nd session of the UN Human Rights Council

Item 4: General Debate

The work of this Council and its mechanisms to shed light on violations, recognise victims and hold violators accountable is essential to its effectiveness. All too often, however, this General Debate can seem a ritual; a grab-bag of references to country situations dictated – according to some – by political agendas, external influences and realpolitik calculations.

Because of challenges on the ground, defenders often find themselves unable to raise their voice; because of the politics of this Council, they are sometimes unsure what added value this forum can have. But sometimes, they – or their family members – have no remaining alternatives. Zhang Qing, wife of imprisoned Chinese activist **Yang Maodong**, is one of those defenders. She now lives in exile and was unable to travel here, but I share her words.

My husband, best known as Guo Feixiong, started his activism as a student in 1986 and has become known as a dissident writer and ‘barefoot lawyer’. For his work to defend human rights, including using the UN system, he has been targeted, harassed, detained and imprisoned by the Chinese government.

After two years in detention both pre-trial and awaiting verdict, on 27 November 2015 he was sentenced to six years in prison on charges of ‘gathering a crowd to disturb public order’ and ‘picking quarrels and stirring up trouble’. He had organized peaceful demonstrations calling for the Chinese government to ratify the ICCPR.

In late April of this year, we discovered he had been ill for months. The authorities refused to provide him adequate medical treatment, and when he requested an exam informed him he would be sent to hospital only if he lost consciousness. When finally he was seen by a doctor in early May, he was subject to a forced rectal exam. The process was filmed. Prison guards threatened to post the video online.

In protest of this inhumane and degrading treatment, my husband began a hunger strike. As of June 19th, Father’s Day, it had been six weeks.

I hope that the voice of the international community, this Council, and UN experts can call, loudly, for China to release my husband, so he may go to an external hospital for an independent medical exam and for the care needed to save his life.

Zhang and her two children are clear-eyed about the challenges of confronting the Chinese legal system, and understand that Yang Maodong’s case is, sadly, one of too many. Yet she believes that the delegates in this room can influence whether or not her husband will become, and I quote: ‘the next Cao Shunli’.