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Obama: Meet with NGOs on China Trip

(New York, October 19, 2009) – President Obama should meet with directors of independent nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on his November trip to China, Asia Catalyst said in an open letter today. They are likely to be followed, threatened, or placed under house arrest during his visit. A meeting with him would give them some political shelter.

“The President’s trip will put lawyers and NGOs – and the important work they do -- at risk,” said Sara (Meg) Davis, executive director of Asia Catalyst. “Meeting with them is least he could do.”

In recent years, China has begun to tolerate a small number of independent NGOs that work on such issues as HIV/AIDS, rule of law and the environment. However, authorities remain highly suspicious of civil society, which has developed under heavy restrictions. Many NGOs are unable to register legally, face frequent shutdowns of their websites, and deal on a daily basis with the threat of police raids and harassment.

“These are not wild-eyed radicals. They are lawyers and directors of small, peaceful, grassroots NGOs who are trying to do some good through their programs, and through the existing legal system,” Davis said. “Some are community activists just like the President was once himself. But on every major state visit to China, many of these individuals are threatened, followed and detained.”

During major national holidays and state visits, police routinely sweep the Beijing streets of undesirables and warn community leaders not to leave home, in order to prevent their speaking out or protesting in public:

- In October, a Henan Province health rights activist was placed under house arrest during China’s National Day celebrations and prevented from traveling to an international conference. Police also detained director of legal aid center Open Society Initiative, Xu Zhiyong, as part of the extensive preparations for the National Day celebrations;
- During Senator of State Clinton’s visit to Beijing in February, more than a dozen activists and NGO directors were followed by police, threatened, or placed under house arrest, including Zeng Jinyan, blogger and wife of imprisoned AIDS

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- activist Hu Jia.
- Numerous activists around China were threatened or detained in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, and warned to leave town until the Olympics were over;
 - Religious rights activist Hua Huiqi was detained to prevent his meeting President Bush at a Beijing church in 2008;
 - During President Bush's visit to China in 2005, police detained housing rights activist Ni Yulan.

“Now that he is a Nobel laureate, the world looks to Obama to be a beacon of human rights,” Davis said. “Meeting with NGO directors is the bare minimum he could do in this regard.”

Asia Catalyst, a nonprofit organization based in New York City, partners with NGOs and advocates in Asia to inspire, create and launch innovative, self-sustaining programs and organizations that advance human rights, social justice and environmental protection. For more information, visit www.asiacatalyst.org.