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EDITORIAL

Gao Zhisheng, Hu Jia, Liu Xiaobo

Washington and Beijing are, rightly, eager to lower tensions. After President Obama met President Hu Jintao of China at the White House on Monday, officials said they had agreed to work together to come up with new sanctions on Iran. That is good news.

Mr. Obama also must squarely acknowledge — and protest — the Chinese leadership's continuing, ruthless stifling of any serious political dissent. That is bad news for China and the world.

The most recent reminder came when Gao Zhisheng, a crusading human rights lawyer, resurfaced last month. For more than a year, he had disappeared into the clutches of the government security network and many people had feared that he was dead.

Mr. Gao was a dynamic advocate, pushing constitutional reform and representing controversial cases like the Falun Gong spiritual movement. But in a sometimes tearful interview with The Associated Press last week, he announced that he would abandon activism in hopes of being able to reunite with his family. "I don't have the capacity to persevere," he said.

Mr. Gao refused to discuss his ordeal, but we have no reason not to assume the worst. He was jailed on two previous occasions, and he later described his brutal torture by police, including electric shocks to his genitals.

This latest disappearance has been devastating for Mr. Gao and his family, which had been under constant police surveillance for years. Press reports said that his teenage daughter had tried to commit suicide. His wife and children escaped to the United States last year.

Chinese authorities also are doing their best to break two other men of conscience who are still being held. On Monday, family members said the government had rejected a request for a medical parole for Hu Jia, who has shown signs of possible liver cancer. He gained prominence fighting to protect AIDS patients, environmental causes and democratic rights before being charged two years ago with subverting state power.

In February, a Beijing appeals court upheld an 11-year sentence for Liu Xiaobo, who was convicted of subversion for helping organize the Charter 08 manifesto that called for sweeping political reforms.

Mr. Hu and Mr. Liu should be released from jail now. Mr. Gao should be permitted to reunite with his family. Perhaps Mr. Gao can one day again take up the struggle for human rights and justice. He certainly does not have to apologize for “disappointing” his supporters as he did during his interview. Nothing Beijing’s autocrats may say or do can take away his legacy of courage in the face of repression.

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