

GAO ZHIZHENG RECEIVES SHAHBAZ BHATTI AWARD



August 24, 2018 Ceremony at Cupertino City Hall, California
Notes for David Kilgour

It is an honour to represent First Step Forum at this presentation of our Bhatti award to Geng He on behalf of her husband, who is now disappeared in China for the past 379 days.

Pakistan's first Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti was an elected member of its National Assembly from 2008 until his tragic assassination in March, 2011. He accepted the post for the sake of the "oppressed, down-trodden and marginalized" of Pakistan and dedicated his life to the "struggle for human equality, social justice, religious freedom and to uplift and empower minorities' communities".

First Step Forum is a 22-member international NGO based in Helsinki, with a membership having a wide diversity of origins, denominations and occupations. We monitor abuses of human and religious rights in many parts of the world, seeking to build bridges "for friendships, democracy and to work for constructive multilateral and multireligious partnerships with governments, organizations and agencies..."

Gao Zhisheng, 53, is an internationally-respected human rights lawyer and a Christian. He was first targeted by the Beijing party-state in 2005 for standing up for Falun Gong and Christians. He has been disappeared since August, 2017, when police seized him in northern China.

His family is now especially worried, partly because of his severe dental problems. Geng He and the children, Grace, 25, and Peter, 15, fled China for the U.S. in 2009.

His latest book, *Unwavering Convictions-Torture and Faith in China's Future*, was co-published by the American Bar Association and the Carolina Academic Press. As a lawyer, he defended some of China's most vulnerable persons, including coal miners and Falun Gong. In another book, *A China More Just*, 2007 he described his years in prison, including 3 in solitary confinement without light. He writes that he was sustained by his faith and hopes for a different China.

Gao has an extraordinary personal history. As a child, he and his family lived in a cave in northern China and listened outside an elementary classes until an uncle helped him to attend secondary school. After leaving the army, he married Geng He, worked as a food vendor, and later took a course in law and passed the bar exam in 1995. By 2001, he was recognized by the ministry of Justice as "one of the countries 10 best lawyers" for his work in "fighting for just compensation for dispossessed landowners". He has twice been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Why has Gao today been missing for more than a year? Why is he disappeared? Why are none of his family members in China unable or unwilling to answer their phones when Geng He calls them from America?

Why were the identification papers for all of Gao's family in Xing Jian taken away?

Could the rule of law international community represented in China request their heads of missions to seek to learn his whereabouts? Yulin City in Shanxi province was where he was last seen.

When Gao was released in August 2014, he stayed with his brother, Gao Zhi Yi, who is now refused any answers at the public safety bureau when he attempts to learn his brother's present location.

Might heads of state and international organizations please express their concern about Gao? Could they invite him to their countries for medical treatment? He is prepared now to go abroad for such treatment.

Thanks from Gao's family to all of you here today and to other friends abroad who continue to keep him in your thoughts/prayers and to seek to help him, including Congressman Chris Smith, former Congressman Frank Wolf, Rev. Bob Fu.

Thank you all.