

USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett made the following remarks at the announcement of the Defending Freedoms Project on December 6, 2012, a project of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, in conjunction with USCIRF and Amnesty International USA.

The goal of this project is to increase attention to and support for human rights and religious freedom through a focus on prisoners of conscience around the world. Congressional offices will adopt at least one prisoner and work in support of that prisoner's release, and through this effort, also advocate against the laws and policies that have led to this person's detention. Prisoners thus come to symbolize the problematic laws of the country which has detained them.

Natan Sharansky, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Pastor Youcef Naderkhani are just some of the many people across the globe who have been unjustly imprisoned for their beliefs. Fortunately, these three men and women of conscience now are free. We glory in their liberty. We applaud the lives they've lived. We cherish the work they've done to advance the cause of freedom and dignity for all.

Sadly, many people today are not free, but languish in jail cells around the world. They are imprisoned because of who they are, what they believe, and how they have chosen to express their convictions. These prisoners of conscience are unjustly prevented from enjoying the most fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and other international human rights standards.

We must shine a light on these prisoners of conscience until they are free -- and until the countries which keep them imprisoned have released them and have implemented needed reforms.

To that end, as Chair of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, I am so pleased to be here today with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International USA to announce the creation of the Defending Freedoms Project. Through this project, Members of Congress will select prisoners to support, highlight their cases, stand in solidarity with them, and let them and the world know that they are not alone. In addition, by shining a light on the laws and policies that have led to their imprisonment, Members of Congress will be working both for their release and to hold their governments accountable.

The Project will rely not on laws or customs that are specific to any one country, including our own, but on universal human rights standards to which nearly every country has assented. It will use these same internationally approved standards, freely agreed to by most of the same nations which violate them in practice, to hold those nations accountable for mistreating and abusing the innocent.

We have heard from Representative Wolf about his selection of Gao Zhisheng of China and Representative McGovern's of Nabeel Rajab of Bahrain. I especially want to commend Representatives McGovern and Wolf, not only for their leadership on this special project, but for their longstanding leadership and support for human rights around the world.

This event feels like coming home to me. My father, Tom Lantos, was proud to call Representatives McGovern and Wolf colleagues and friends, and worked closely with them for many years. Like my father, my mother, Annette Lantos --who will be our next speaker – has always considered the cause of freedom and dignity to be near and dear to her heart. It is a Lantos family tradition to care -- and care deeply -- about those who are oppressed. And I know I speak for my mother and for the memory of my father when I tell you that as long as there is air in our lungs, we will continue to speak for those who cannot speak for themselves.

Yes, it is true that wherever we look, we see walls of tyranny and compared to these barriers, our words and deeds seem modest indeed. But as the late Jack Kemp once said, “there is a kind of victory in good work, no matter how humble.” And in the words of the late Robert F. Kennedy, “Each time we.....strike out against injustice, we send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other...those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

So let us encourage each other through these words as we open a humble new chapter today in the cause of human rights and universal dignity.

Thank you.