**Oral Comments**

**For Hearing on**

**Defending Prisoners of Conscience**

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**February 15, 2018**

**2:00 PM**

**2255 Rayburn House Office Building**

Thank you to the Commission’s Co-Chairs, Representatives Hultgren and McGovern, for holding today’s hearing, and to Congressman Lowenthal and Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee for your remarks and advocacy.

I am Kristina Arriaga and I serve as Vice Chairwoman for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (or USCIRF). We are an independent, bipartisan federal government commission created by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act to monitor the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad and make recommendation to Congress, the State Department and the White House. I would request that my written testimony be submitted for the record.

Advocating on behalf of prisoners of conscience has been a lifelong passion for me, and a high priority for USCIRF since our inception. We were proud to help launch the Defending Freedoms Project with the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in 2012, and we recognize the tireless work of our NGO partners, including those represented on the panel today.

In 2017, USCIRF also launched the Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project. Our aim is to draw attention to prisoners of conscience and to the flawed laws and policies that led to their imprisonment. Each of the Commissioners, myself included, have chosen to advocate for specific individuals. These men and women come from different faiths, or no faith at all, from varied political perspectives, and parts of the world, but they all have been unjustly imprisoned for exercising one of the most fundamental of human rights.

Since the launch of USCIRF’s Religious Prisoners of Conscience Project, we’ve seen some progress. In July of last year, Pastor Chinh, a Christian leader in Vietnam, was released almost six years early from an eleven-year prison sentence. Congressman Lowenthal, Commissioner Jackie Wolcott, an array of human rights organizations and the U.S State Department all repeatedly raised his case, forcefully condemning his imprisonment and calling for his release. Regrettably, Buddhist leader and dissident Thich Quang Do remains under house arrest in Vietnam. In Iran, we also saw the release of two Baha’i women, Fariba Kamalabadi and poet Mavesh Sabet, members of the Baha’i 7. Still five of the Baha’i seven remain in prison.

I have, along with my fellow Vice Chairwoman Sandra Jolley, been advocating for Pastor Andrew Brunson. An American citizen, Pastor Brunson was arrested in Izmir, Turkey in October of 2016 and accused of trying to overthrow the Turkish government. Vice Chairwoman Jolley and I were granted permission to visit Pastor Brunson in prison last October. It was a surreal experience to spend an hour with an innocent man who has lost fifty pounds since his arrest and is held in almost complete isolation. He is the only English speaker in his prison, the only Christian, he is never allowed to leave his cell for any reason except for a weekly visit from his wife or the consular officer. We call for Pastor Brunson to be released immediately.

Finally, let me just quickly highlight a region where I believe too many prisoners of conscience have been forgotten or overlooked: Central Asia. We regularly receive reports, and have reported on, examples of Muslims, Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and others who have been rounded up and imprisoned without due process by governments in this region. In Uzbekistan, the estimated number of prisoners of conscience ranges as high as 10,000. Their names or identities are mostly unknown. In Turkmenistan, prisoners of conscience are often simply “disappeared,” never to be heard from or seen again. In nearby Russia, prisoners do not fare any better. The Jehovah Witnesses are suffering greatly and recently Scientologists such as Ivan Matsitsky, have been rounded up and imprisoned.

Oscar Biscet, the Afro-Cuban medical doctor, who has been tortured, beaten, imprisoned said last year, during a short visit to the US before returning to Cuba: I have a moral obligation to return to Cuba. Just recently I met with a young Catholic priest, Fr. Castor José Álvarez Devesa. He is calling for reform in Cuba so that Cubans can experience the freedom they deserve. He looked at me in the eye and said he was willing to die, be tortured, be imprisoned for freedom. Just last week he returned to Cuba. Those of us who have the privilege of living in freedom must stand with those who fight for freedom of religion or belief.

We have a moral obligation. After all, silence is the enabler of the oppressor