

RELEASE IN FULL

Due to Toria's statement being released, this update includes breaking news on the wires and on Twitter.

SUMMARY OF MEDIA COVERAGE

(as of May 4, 2012 8:35 a.m. EDT / 1035 Beijing, prepared by PA)

All major morning news broadcasts covered Chen Guangcheng and China's permission to allow him to come to the United States to study. Reporters continue to predict next steps for U.S. officials and have called China's permission to allow Chen to study overseas a face saving budge. Many raised questions of what a deal would mean for the broader U.S. - China relationship and speculated on what would happen to Chen's family and whether or not the U.S. could secure their safety. Morning shows mentioned that they were waiting for Secretary Clinton to make remarks and later returned to the story and picked up with the Secretary expressing optimism at her press conference.

Articles in all major newspapers have routinely been updated with bits and pieces of Chen wanting to come to the United States and that he must apply to study abroad "like any other Chinese citizen." The Washington Post updated their running story signifying that the Chen case continues to be in limbo as Secretary Clinton wraps up her trip.

Wires are beginning to report on Spokesperson Nuland's statement acknowledging that Chen has been given a fellowship at a U.S. university, we expect China to quickly handle the travel procedures for him and that the agreement included allowing Chen's wife and two children to also leave so he can accept the fellowship. The Secretary's comments during her press availability in Beijing are being picked up citing that progress is being made, we are encouraged by the Chinese statement and that U.S. Embassy staff were able to meet with Chen Friday.

Political rhetoric and criticism has decreased since last night and only CBS acknowledged Romney's critique. The focus is on a solution that will satisfy Chen, the Chinese and Americans.

NBC - Today Show

Ann Curry led the morning show with "Secretary Clinton expected to comment for the first time" on Chen's case and asked what should the U.S. do and whether the case has damaged the U.S.-China relationship. Foreign correspondent, Ian Williams reported from Beijing and was "waiting for first comment in a nightmare of a diplomatic week" by Secretary Clinton. He elaborated on Chen's permission to study abroad but noted that there was no hint about what it means for his family. Williams said U.S. diplomats were prevented from being able to see Chen today when a U.S. diplomatic car was turned away when it arrived at the hospital. Ann Curry speculated that Chen will likely have to wait for months or even years to get a passport but noted that China wants a way out and study abroad may be the best solution. Natalie Morales revisited the story saying the Secretary is "expressing optimism" and ran the Secretary remarks confirming Chen's change of heart, we are encouraged by the Chinese government's statement allowing him to travel and over course of Friday progress has been made for the future Chen wants and we will stay in touch with him.

CBS - This Morning

Chen was the top story under the title "Obama's China Syndrome." The lead-in focused on criticism of the Obama administration's handling of the situation, yesterday's hearing on the Hill and Chen's call, the Administration wanting to settle this before Clinton leaves Beijing, and the need to balance our position on human rights with the necessity of staying engaged with China. Former White House Press Secretary, Robert Gibbs responded to accusations that the administration has mishandled the situation by saying the DOS has been working very hard on-the-ground in Beijing (he did not make any statement of support for handling); he reiterated that we bring up human rights whenever we meet with China; and also touched-on election politics saying that if Romney has an alternate approach to this, he'll surely lay it out.

ABC – Good Morning America

There was a brief mention at the top calling the Chen situation a potential breakthrough with Secretary Clinton who is about to step to the podium. State Department correspondent, Martha Raddatz reported that the Secretary's press conference is forthcoming, where there could be an announcement and that Chinese officials gave opening to Chen to study abroad. It was mentioned that the Secretary is under intense scrutiny over the situation.

CNN – Early Start

Chen was mentioned throughout the morning segment as well as Secretary Clinton's upcoming press conference. The situation was referred to as a "diplomatic firestorm" and a "delicate diplomatic dance." Reporter Stan Grant in Beijing mentioned it seems that China is trying to score a diplomatic win with the U.S. Change in Chen's tactics – just wants to go to the U.S. for holiday or to study and not come permanently and the State Department is not commenting on plans for Chen. American officials are not able to meet Chen, but did see his wife to help her and her husband. Excerpt of Secretary Clinton "we and you do not always see the same situation in the same way" ran before the broadcast ended.

CNN – Starting Point

Soledad O'Brien reported a possible breakthrough with Chen being allowed to study abroad. Ran clip of Secretary saying that we don't always see situations in the same way, but none of the misperceptions or differences of opinion (between U.S. and China) should be allowed to interfere with our relationship. O'Brien noted U.S. officials have met with Chen. This could get the Secretary out of a tough situation. Soledad O'Brien interviewed Jerome Cohen, longtime contact of Chen's. He was cautiously optimistic, said Chen being allowed to study abroad could provide way ahead to resolving situation, hoping to see Chen in U.S. soon. CNN then picked up briefly live the Secretary's press conference. She talked of looking at relationship through "new lens." Cut away to O'Brien noting that we could be nearing end to potential conflict over Chen situation.

SELECT ARTICLES FROM MAJOR OUTLETS

The New York Times

China Says Dissident Can Apply to Leave for Study Abroad

By MICHAEL WINES

May 4, 2012

BEIJING — China's Foreign Ministry said on Friday that the dissident Chen Guangcheng can apply to study outside China in the same manner as other Chinese citizens, signaling a possible breakthrough in a diplomatic crisis that has deeply embarrassed the White House and threatens to sour relations with Beijing.

In a two-sentence statement posted on the ministry's Web site, a spokesman, Liu Weimin, stated that should Mr. Chen wish to study abroad, he "can apply through normal channels to the relevant departments in accordance with the law, just like any other Chinese citizen."

Speaking later at a press briefing, Mr. Liu said he was certain that "competent Chinese authorities will handle his application in accordance with the law."

The announcement came hours after Mr. Chen, in a four-point statement conveyed by telephone to a friend, insisted that he did not want to seek political asylum in the United States but that he had been invited to attend New York University and hoped "to go to the United States and rest for several months."

That would give Chinese officials a face-saving opportunity to allow Mr. Chen and his family to leave China in the same manner as do scores of thousands of Chinese students every year, according to Jerome A. Cohen, a New York attorney and expert on Chinese law who discussed the proposal with Mr. Chen this week.

Mr. Chen has been in a central Beijing hospital receiving treatment for an injured foot since Wednesday, when he left the United States Embassy under an agreement between American and Chinese diplomats that would have allowed him to study law in Tianjin, a major city on China's Pacific coast. The diplomatic crisis erupted after Mr. Chen came to believe that the Chinese government would not honor the bargain and began telling friends from his hospital bed that he feared for his and his family's safety.

Mr. Chen's subsequent pleas for help from Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton — repeated in an urgent telephone call played on speaker during an emergency congressional hearing in Washington on Thursday — frayed the fragile deal American officials had struck with the Chinese only one day before the start of high-level talks between China and the United States.

American diplomats have worked frantically to recoup but since Wednesday they have been barred by the Chinese even from visiting Mr. Chen in his hospital room. American diplomats sought on Friday to deliver a package including food and two cellphones to Mr. Chen, Reuters reported. They were forced to leave it outside, the news agency said.

The embassy's deputy chief of mission, Robert Wang, was able to meet Mr. Chen's wife Yuan Weijing on Friday. In a telephone conversation with The Associated Press, Mr. Chen said his wife was being followed by men who are recording her movements on video and that his own conversations with American officials were being cut off after a couple of sentences.

The Obama administration has been bombarded with criticism from human rights activists and its Republican critics that it had botched its handling of a major human rights case and placed one of China's most famous rights activists in jeopardy.

Mr. Chen's initial remarks have fueled those attacks. In a telephone conversation on Thursday with The New York Times, he said that Chinese government guarantees of his safety were

“empty talk” and that he had left the embassy the previous day in part because of Chinese threats that his family would be harmed if he did not agree to leave.

“The U.S. Embassy treated me well,” he said, “but the U.S. government was not proactive enough.”

In brief telephone conversations with news services on Friday, Mr. Chen continued to express concern for his and his family’s safety. But he has backed away from earlier implicit criticisms of American efforts to assist him, instead expressing deep gratitude for diplomatic help from the United States.

Senior American officials have privately acknowledged missteps in the handling of the case.

In posts on Twitter and a Chinese microblog, a friend who assisted in Mr. Chen’s flight to the American Embassy, Guo Yushan, said Mr. Chen had told him he was “totally astonished” by the crisis his earlier statements had provoked. Mr. Guo said he had talked at length with Mr. Chen late Thursday and posted a summary of their talk on Friday.

“He never complained, either directly or indirectly, that the United States Embassy forced or induced him to leave the embassy. He left the embassy voluntarily and appreciates very much the United States Embassy’s help during the past week,” he wrote.

Mr. Chen “has much respect for China-U.S. diplomatic efforts,” he wrote, and “is very much aware of the importance of diplomacy between the two countries and the seriousness of all agreements that have already been reached.”

Bree Feng contributed research.

The Associated Press

US says Chinese activist has fellowship in US

By GILLIAN WONG and MATTHEW LEE

BEIJING (AP) - The U.S. State Department says a blind activist has fellowship at a U.S. university and it expects China to quickly handle the travel procedures for him.

Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Friday that the agreement included allowing Chen's wife and two children to also leave so he can accept the fellowship.

Earlier, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the U.S. was working to give Chen the future he wants, and that U.S. Embassy staff was able to meet with him at a hospital where he is under police guard.

Chen, who embroiled the U.S. and China in a diplomatic standoff when he sought refuge in the U.S. Embassy, has said he wants to leave China with his family.

The Associated Press

China hints at solution to standoff over activist

By GILLIAN WONG

May 4, 2012

BEIJING (AP) — Blind Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng's high-profile pleas for U.S. sanctuary upped the pressure Friday on Washington and Beijing to resolve his fate, with China saying he could apply for permission to study abroad.

The slight concession, offered in a Chinese Foreign Ministry statement, pointed to a possible way out of the diplomatic standoff. Even so, he remained in a guarded Beijing hospital ward, unable to see U.S. officials. His wife's movements are being monitored, he said, and the couple with their two children feel in danger.

"I can only tell you one thing. My situation right now is very dangerous," Chen said. "For two days, American officials who have wanted to come and see me have not been allowed in."

A self-taught lawyer and symbol in China's civil rights movement, Chen embroiled Washington and Beijing in their most delicate diplomatic crisis in years after he escaped house arrest and sought refuge in the U.S. Embassy last week. He left six days later under a negotiated deal in which he and his family were to be safely relocated in China. But he then upended the agreement by saying they wanted to go abroad.

Since his release to a Beijing hospital where he was reunited with his wife, son and daughter, Chen's conversations with The Associated Press, other foreign media and friends have resonated around the world, and even become part of Washington politics in a presidential election year. On Thursday, he called in to a congressional hearing in Washington, telling lawmakers he wanted to meet U.S. Secretary of State Clinton, who is in Beijing for annual security talks.

"I hope I can get more help from her," Chen said.

While publicly Washington has said little and Beijing has shown little inclination to budge, contacts have taken place. Clinton met Chinese President Hu Jintao and other top leaders, though officials declined to say if Chen's case was discussed. The Foreign Ministry statement was among the first signs of progress. In it, a spokesman said Chen as a normal citizen may apply to study overseas.

"Chen Guangcheng is currently being treated in hospital. As a Chinese citizen, if he wants to study abroad he can go through the normal channels to the relevant departments and complete the formalities in accordance with the law like other Chinese citizens," the statement said without elaborating. At a later briefing spokesman Liu Weimin declined to elaborate.

While the statement only reiterates the normal rights of a Chinese citizen, it underscored the government's openness to letting him go and that Chen faces no criminal charges. Though he has lived under arrest at his rural home along with his family for 20 months, his treatment has appeared to be the retribution of local officials angry at Chen's activism.

Chen has exposed forced abortions and other abuses in his community as part of China's population controls.

The positive tone aside, U.S. diplomats were unable to meet Chen personally for a second day Friday, able to talk only by telephone. U.S. Embassy deputy chief of mission Robert Wang entered the grounds of Chaoyang Hospital carrying food and later meeting Chen's wife, Yuan Weijing.

Chen, in his remarks to the AP, said his phone calls to American officials "keep getting cut off after two sentences." His wife, when she is allowed out of the hospital, has been followed by unidentified men who video-record her, he said. And one of his friends was beaten up trying to visit him.

Jiang Tianyong was taken away and beaten by state security agents when he tried to visit Chen Thursday evening, causing him hearing loss in one ear, Jiang's wife said Friday.

China's well-controlled state media, in some of their first comments on the case, heaped scorn on Washington and U.S. Ambassador Gary Locke, criticizing them for using Chen to demonize China and impose U.S. values.

"The fact that the U.S. brought up the issue of Chen Guangcheng does not mean that the U.S. really has any good will, but that it is full of desires to put on a show," said the Beijing Times. "They look like they are thrilled about finding a tool and a chess piece for messing things up for China."

Washington's involvement in Chen's case — first by taking him in and then by letting him go — has exposed President Barack Obama to criticism in what is expected to be a closely fought re-election campaign. Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican challenger, savaged the White House on Thursday for putting Chen at risk.

"If these reports are true, this is a dark day for freedom and it's a day of shame for the Obama administration," Romney said, campaigning in Virginia.

Politics is also playing into Beijing's handling of the case. Hu and others in the Communist Party leadership are stepping aside later this year for a younger generation of leaders, and while the seats are shifting, uncompromising views on dissent and on American interference are usually safe lines of attack.

REUTERS

Clinton Says Encouraged by China Statement on Dissident Chen
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BEIJING (Reuters) - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Friday that the U.S. Ambassador in Beijing had spoken to the blind Chinese rights activist Chen Guangcheng, and was encouraged by China's statement that Chen might be allowed to study abroad.

Clinton told reporters in Beijing that "progress has been made" in helping Chen determine his future, after days of negotiations over the activist who fled for six days into the U.S. embassy in Beijing after escaping house arrest.

"We have been very clear and committed to honoring his choices and our values," Clinton said of Chen, who is now in a Beijing hospital and has said he wants to spend time in the United States. "We will continue engaging with the Chinese government on these (human rights) issues at the highest level, putting these concerns at the height of our diplomacy."
(Reporting by Andrew Quinn; Writing by Chris Buckley; Editing by Ken Wills)

The Washington Post

Chen Guangcheng still in limbo as Clinton wraps up China meetings

By Keith B. Richburg, Jia Lynn Yang and William Wan, Friday, May 4, 7:20 AM

BEIJING — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton closed high-level trade talks in China on Friday with the status of blind activist Chen Guangcheng still in limbo. Chen remained isolated in a hospital, out of reach of American diplomats.

China's Foreign Ministry said Chen, who made a dramatic plea on Thursday to leave China with Clinton, will have to apply through normal channels if he wants to study or travel outside the country.

Neither Clinton nor her Chinese counterparts mentioned Chen in their formal remarks at the end of a two-day meeting on trade and security issues, saying instead that U.S.-Sino differences on human rights issues must not disrupt the broader relationship between the two world powers.

Clinton said the United States "continues to raise human rights because we believe they are essential for every country to uphold, and we raise specific matters of individuals and situations whenever necessary."

However, she added, it is important not to allow disagreements to damage the relationship between the two countries. "I'm told there is a Taoist wisdom that says to lead, one must see the larger picture," Clinton continued. "I might say it a little differently. Namely, that you have to look at the trendlines, not just the headlines."

State Counsellor Dai Bingguo, China's top foreign policy expert, said his country and the United States still have "fundamental differences" on human rights issues. "Human rights should not be a disturbance in state-to-state relations," Dai said. "It should not be used to interfere in another country's internal affairs."

Over the last two days, Chen has told friends and advocates of threats and mistreatment by Chinese security officials. He said he fears for his and his family's safety and wanted to leave with Clinton for a temporary stay in the United States, perhaps to study at a university.

In a telephone interview early Friday, Chen said he does not blame American officials for his plight after leaving the U.S. Embassy under a deal they helped strike. But he accused Chinese officials of renegeing on their promises to fully restore his freedom.

A few hours later, he made a dramatic call into a congressional hearing, telling lawmakers in Washington through the cellphone of a human rights activist that he wanted to travel to the United States to rest and that he was most worried about "the safety of my mother and my brothers."

"It's not a one-time-only decision," Chen told the Washington Post from his hospital room. "It doesn't mean I won't come back. As a free person, I believe I am endowed with the right to leave China when I want to and come back anytime I want."

China's foreign ministry responded by posting a two-sentence statement by spokesman Liu Weimin on its Web site. "Chen Guangcheng is currently being treated in hospital," Liu said. "If he wants to study abroad, he can apply through normal channels to the relevant departments, according to the law, just like any other Chinese citizen."

Analysts said it would make sense strategically for China to allow Chen to leave the country, because his departure would likely lessen his international visibility. Letting him go for medical treatment or to study would enable China's leaders to save face, and not be perceived by the Chinese public as caving to foreign pressure.

"It's like a time bomb to let him stay," said Cheng Li, an expert on China's leadership at the Brookings Institution. "Previously they preferred to send such dissidents abroad, where they often become marginalized."

Jerome Cohen, an American lawyer and a friend of Chen's who has advised him throughout his negotiations with the Chinese government the past week, said, "the better chance for Chen is to go abroad to study or to be a visiting scholar. Or even to go as a tourist."

But Chen has no passport, and would likely face a wait of months or even years if he applied to leave the country through normal procedures--with no guarantee that permission would be granted.

American officials have expressed concern and frustration at not being able to meet with Chen in person, despite assurances they thought they had received during four days of secret negotiations while Chen was being harbored at the U.S. Embassy.

Chen found himself isolated in a central Beijing hospital on Friday as Chinese guards barred U.S. diplomats, journalists and supporters from seeing him. The Obama administration was sharply criticized for its handling of the crisis. And officials acknowledged that granting Chen any assistance — much less safe passage to the United States — has grown far more complex and difficult since his departure from the embassy on Wednesday, six days after escaping de facto house arrest in his village.

Once Chen left the sovereign soil of the embassy, the leverage of U.S. officials went with him. Now he is under the control of Chinese authorities, who appear to be blocking all access to the activist.

“We haven’t had either a diplomat or a doctor in to see him,” said one U.S. official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to be more candid. “There’s plenty of anxiety about what’s going on.”

The official said that U.S. diplomats had extraordinary difficulties even trying to telephone Chen on Thursday and that their two calls with him were extremely brief, with one cut off after just seconds. Lacking direct access to Chen, U.S. officials met his wife, Yuan Weijing, outside the hospital.

A senior State Department official said U.S. Embassy personnel again spoke with Chen and met with his wife late Friday morning.

According to U.S. officials, Chen had previously insisted that he wanted to remain in China. But U.S. Ambassador Gary Locke said Thursday that “it’s apparent now that he’s had a change of heart.”

Chen, in the interview, clarified reports portraying him as pleading for asylum, insisting that he wants to travel to the United States only temporarily, retaining the freedom to return to China.

Some Republicans and human rights advocates have accused the Obama administration of mismanaging Chen’s case, saying it was too trusting of the Chinese government, given its history of mistreating dissidents.

“Our embassy failed to put in place the kind of verifiable measures that would have assured the safety of Mr. Chen and his family,” said Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee. “If these reports are true, this is a dark day for freedom, and it’s a day of shame for the Obama administration.”

‘Substantial’ fallout

For China, the crisis falls into an ongoing struggle between increasingly visible reform-minded moderates within the Communist Party and hard-liners who emphasize security and stability at any cost.

Some analysts saw Chinese officials’ quick acceptance of Wednesday’s deal as a sign of the reform faction’s sway. In many ways, China’s apparent willingness to give assurances to a foreign country about how it would treat one of its citizens was exceedingly rare.

But the deal’s rapid unraveling could, instead, boost hard-liners.

“The collateral damage here is substantial,” said Kenneth G. Lieberthal, a China expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington. “If there was a debate on the Chinese side on whether to negotiate, this certainly isn’t good for those who pushed for the deal.”

At the hospital Thursday, police harshly treated journalists and a small number of Chen’s supporters who tried to see him in his first-floor room. On Friday, more supporters reported being beaten and detained by police for going to the hospital to try to visit Chen.

Security officials also reportedly took away government-issued press cards from some journalists who tried to enter the hospital. On Friday, police were taking down the names and press card information from reporters who gathered outside the hospital.

Du Yanlin, an accountant and tax consultant for the dissident artist Ai Weiwei, said he tried to visit Chen around 1 p.m. Thursday but was turned away by plainclothes police officers. After he and his friends posed for a photo in front of the hospital wearing sunglasses like Chen’s, Du said, police followed him home and questioned him for “making trouble.”

Jiang Tianyong, a human rights lawyer, described in an interview how he went to Chaoyang hospital to try to see Chen around 6 p.m. Thursday, but was immediately hustled into an unmarked car by about 10 plainclothes officers from Beijing’s Haidan district public security branch.

Jiang said the agents took him to a hotel room where they first repeatedly insulted and berated him, and then one “suddenly jumped on me and punched me heavily three times, on my left ear, my right ear and my chest. I instantly felt a severe hearing loss.”

Jiang said he could barely hear, but they told him “The Chen Guangcheng incident is a big matter, not a small matter.”

Jiang said the policemen refused his repeated requests to go to a hospital; instead, they made him strip from the waist up and stand in the cold air of an air conditioner turned on full blast. He said he was taken home only around 3 a.m. Friday, and is now under effective house arrest with a police car parked outside his apartment with four or five officers waiting.

Apparent change of heart

Chen’s case overshadowed the U.S.-China talks Thursday and Friday that were led on the U.S. side by Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner.

Both sides were careful not to mention Chen’s case specifically. But from his isolated hospital room, Chen still managed to thrust himself into the center of the stage-managed diplomacy when he told interviewers that he wanted to fly to the United States with Clinton when she leaves Saturday. U.S. officials and analysts, however, said privately that such a dramatic departure was unlikely, given the significant political, diplomatic and legal hurdles, including Chen’s lack of passport or visa.

The activist's apparent change of heart about where he wants to live has made the tense diplomatic episode especially difficult. More details emerged Thursday about what might have prompted his abrupt shift.

From the time he entered the fortified U.S. Embassy compound on April 26, Chen insisted that he wanted to remain in China and be reunited with his wife, said Locke and other officials. Under the original deal reached with Chinese officials, according to U.S. diplomats, the self-taught lawyer was to be allowed to move his family to the Beijing area and begin a new life as a university student.

But after Chen was taken in an embassy van to Chaoyang Hospital, he had his first extended telephone conversations with friends and allies, as well as his attorney, Teng Biao. Teng later posted the transcript of his Wednesday conversation with Chen on his Twitter account, in which he told Chen about the arrest of his relatives and some activists who aided in his escape from his farmhouse in Shandong province. Teng then asked Chen whether any U.S. diplomats remained with him at the hospital.

"No, they've all gone," Chen replied, according to the transcript. "They said they would accompany me all the way, but now they've all gone."

Teng said, "Then you're in a really dangerous situation!"

In his brief interview early Friday, Chen sounded relaxed and full of energy — a sharp contrast to interviews Thursday, when he was reported to have sounded frightened. He said that he was being treated well at the hospital and that he, his wife and their two children were left alone together in one room.

But he said armed thugs have taken over his farmhouse in Dongshigu village, and he was concerned about other members of his family, with whom he has not been able to speak.

"My biggest wish right now is that the agreement concerning me is fulfilled well," Chen said. "The agreement includes more than three points, including the U.S. side being able to visit me regularly, and China should guarantee my rights as a citizen."

Authorities crack down

Rights activists say the moves to isolate Chen and round up activists who assisted him suggest that Chinese authorities never intended to honor their agreement to treat Chen humanely and allow him to live freely in a new and safe location in China.

Instead, many of his supporters have been harassed, and there has been a near-total blackout of all references to Chen on China's popular Twitter-like microblogging sites. Even his initials, "CGC," and terms such as "blind man," the name of his town, "Linyi," and even the prison escape movie "The Shawshank Redemption" were banned Thursday.

Still, some of Chen's supporters made their way to the hospital. Liu Caiping, 38, said she arrived just after noon Thursday and was accosted by a plainclothes guard, who seized her cellphone.

"I've never seen Chen Guangcheng. I just heard about him last year," she said. "It's quite upsetting to see all the people who struggle for human rights in China are all getting forced out. He can play a bigger role in China."

She then took out a pair of sunglasses like Chen's and had her picture taken as a show of support.

Staff writers Jia Lynn Yang and Emily Heil and researchers Zhang Jie and Liu Liu in Beijing contributed to this report.

The Associated Press

Clinton cites progress in Chinese activist's case

By GILLIAN WONG and MATTHEW LEE

May 4, 2012

BEIJING (AP) - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says progress is being made resolving the case of Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng.

Speaking at a news conference in Beijing, Clinton said she is encouraged by a Chinese government statement that suggested Chen would be allowed to go abroad to study. She says they are working to give Chen the future he wants, and that U.S. Embassy staff was able to meet with him Friday.

Chen, who embroiled the U.S. and China in a diplomatic standoff when he sought refuge in the U.S. Embassy, has said he wants to leave China with his family and his supporters say he would like to study law in the U.S.

Wall Street Journal

China: Activist Can Study Abroad

By CARLOS TEJADA, KEITH JOHNSON, JOSH CHIN and JAY SOLOMON

May 4, 2012

BEIJING – Chinese officials opened a potential way out for both Washington and Beijing in the Chen Guangcheng affair, saying on Friday that the blind legal activist could be allowed to apply to study abroad "like other Chinese citizens."

In a statement on the website of China's Foreign Ministry, spokesman Liu Weimin responded to what the ministry said was a reporter's request for comment on whether Mr. Chen would be allowed to study abroad.

"Chen Guangcheng is currently in the hospital receiving treatment," Mr. Liu said. "If he wants to go abroad to study, as a Chinese citizen he can like other Chinese citizens go through normal channels to take care of the relevant processes at the relevant departments in accordance with the law."

Mr. Chen left the protection of the U.S. embassy in Beijing on Wednesday, where he spent a week following his dramatic April 22 escape from home confinement. But he has since said he changed his mind about a deal that would keep him in China and would instead like to flee with his family to safety in the U.S. His turnabout has sparked a diplomatic row between Beijing and Washington and become a political liability for the Obama administration.

The news Friday came on the heels of Thursday's dramatic negotiations, ending with the most extraordinary moment yet in the week-old affair: Chen Guangcheng addressing a U.S. congressional panel over a cellphone held up by an American Christian activist.

Mr. Chen phoned into a Capitol Hill hearing from his hospital room in Beijing and requested free passage to the U.S. "I want to come to the U.S. to rest. I have not had a rest in 10 years," Mr. Chen said. "I'm concerned most right now with the safety of my mother and brothers. I really want to know what's going on with them."

He also asked for a meeting with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in Beijing until Friday for economic talks. "I hope I can get more help from her," he said, his comments translated to a congressional briefing room filled with lawmakers, journalists and human-rights activists.

Amid mounting criticism, U.S. officials reignited talks with Beijing over the fate of Mr. Chen, whose about-face on a deal keeping him in China threatened a cascade of diplomatic and political embarrassments. The direct appeal to Congress by an activist under Chinese watch heightened the stakes in one of the most serious U.S.-China showdowns since China seized a downed U.S. reconnaissance plane in 2001.

Mr. Chen's surprise call seemed to settle any lingering doubts about his current wishes and sharply illustrated how rapidly the case was morphing into a dire political challenge for President Barack Obama and the White House. Republicans, including presidential hopeful Mitt Romney, demanded the White House take steps to ensure the safety of Mr. Chen and his family. Critics questioned whether the Obama administration hurried the deal surrounding the dissident's fate to solidify its standing with Beijing ahead of the high-level U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue meetings Thursday and Friday.

Developments Thursday also raised questions about the deal negotiated by State Department officials for Mr. Chen's relocation within China that collapsed Wednesday in a drama that unfolded hours after he left the safety of the American embassy.

Throughout Thursday, U.S. officials insisted Mr. Chen had had a "change of heart" and diplomatic officials scrambled to ascertain what he really wanted, meeting with him and his wife at a Beijing hospital where he is undergoing treatment for injuries sustained during a risky escape from his home detention.

But as U.S. officials worked to salvage the deal, they were confronted with a far more challenging negotiating environment -- and the likelihood of rising Chinese impatience.

U.S. officials said Mr. Chen had insisted that he remain in China right up to his departure from the embassy on Wednesday. Activists, U.S. officials and others have suggested his change of heart came after he reached the hospital Wednesday. A person familiar with the matter suggested that only when reunited with his wife did Mr. Chen grasp the gravity of the security situation, leading to a desire for a wholesale escape for the family.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal Thursday, Mr. Chen cited the treatment of his family after he fled de facto house arrest in Shandong province on April 22. "While I was in the embassy, the situation back home was awful," he said. Local authorities "were in my house, in my room. They wouldn't let my family close the door."

"I feel my family members aren't very safe in China," said Mr. Chen. In a separate interview, he said he is in good health "but my heart is tired."

Mr. Chen said he wasn't bitter toward the U.S. embassy over the affair. "I feel the work the embassy has done with this business has been not bad," he said. "I understand completely that this is something they can't solve on their own."

Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell was negotiating with Chinese officials Thursday, said a senior State Department official. The Chinese Foreign Ministry declined to comment.

U.S. officials also began negotiating again with Mr. Chen and his wife, Yuan Weijing. It wasn't clear how much access they had; U.S. officials said they spoke only by phone with Mr. Chen, who was with his family at Chaoyang Hospital. Mr. Chen said on Thursday that U.S. officials had told him that they weren't permitted inside the hospital.

"We need to consult with them further and get a better sense of what they want to do, and together consider their options," said a State Department spokeswoman.

The Capitol Hill hearing was set up by a commission formed to monitor China's human rights record. The Congressional-Executive Commission on China is led by two Republicans, Christopher Smith of New Jersey and Frank Wolf of Virginia.

Mr. Wolf said he would introduce a bill seeking access to all State Department and White House communications related to Mr. Chen's case. "The Obama administration has a high moral obligation to protect Chen and his family," Rep. Wolf said.

Also testifying was Bob Fu, a Chinese-American pastor and rights activist who was in touch with Mr. Chen during his flight last week from his home.

State Department and White House officials have denied allegations by Mr. Fu and others that the U.S. passed on threats from Chinese officials. Administration officials have confirmed that Mr. Chen was informed that his wife and children would be returned to Shandong province if he didn't leave the embassy. But getting sent back implied his family could be subject to further abuse, activists say.

Mr. Chen in the interview left open the possibility he could return to the embassy, where he sought safety on April 26. "The U.S. Embassy never said whether or not I could go back after getting out of the hospital," he said.

It is unclear whether Chinese authorities would permit such a move. Chinese media coverage of the Chen affair has been almost nonexistent, but on Wednesday, the state-run Xinhua news agency ran an article on Mr. Chen, which cited a Foreign Ministry spokesman as criticizing U.S. meddling in Chinese affairs.

Officials said the potential for getting Mr. Chen out of the country was complicated by the need to get permission for him as well as for his wife and two children.

Still, Mr. Chen's public disagreement with the U.S. has drawn more attention to his situation, potentially making it hard for China to move against him without facing criticism.

"He has the protection of world opinion," said Jerome Cohen, who is with the Council on Foreign Relations and an adviser to Mr. Chen. For Beijing, "he's an embarrassment. . . . If I'm the Chinese government, I may say we just want him out of here."

Ambassador Gary Locke said Thursday U.S. officials repeatedly asked if Mr. Chen wanted to go to the U.S., and were told no. He also said Mr. Chen would have been allowed to stay at the embassy for years rather than accept a deal he didn't like and wasn't pressured to leave.

Among the concerns about safety for his family, Mr. Chen -- a self-taught legal activist -- expressed an interest in studying law and asked for protections for activists who helped him and met with him after his escape.

Discussions heated up Tuesday, U.S. officials said, when the U.S. presented an offer to Mr. Chen and a response from China with specifics about which universities he might be allowed to attend to study law. Mr. Chen declined the offer, Mr. Locke said, demanding to speak with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

What Mr. Chen needed was a demonstration of faith from China, Mr. Locke said. The activist asked officials if the Chinese government would send his family to Beijing. U.S. officials passed on the request and his family arrived by train in Beijing. Mr. Locke said Mr. Chen continued to be asked if he was comfortable with the decision to leave the embassy until he got into the van to go to the hospital.

Once reunited with his family, Mr. Chen gave his final assent to the deal, Mr. Locke said. But by that evening, after calls from other activists, Mr. Chen began telling reporters he had changed his mind. He cited what his wife said were threats of bodily harm from security forces who tied her to a chair for two days and threatened to hurt her after he had escaped.

The Atlantic
The Geopolitics of a Confused, Frightened, Blind Man in Beijing
By Max Fisher

May 4, 2012

As Chen Guangcheng's case becomes more complicated and more politicized, the blind activist is wading into superpower politics, and maybe getting in over his head.

Less than a day after blind Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng fretted to a CNN reporter that he was "very disappointed" in U.S. officials for encouraging him -- and, he said, lying in an effort to "lobby" him -- to leave the embassy grounds in Beijing, Chen now says that his sense that the Americans had abandoned him was a "misunderstanding." He expressed his "deep gratitude" to the same American officials whom, only hours earlier, he had lambasted as having not "protected human rights in this case." He disputed the appearance that, since leaving the embassy as part of a deal to live in partial freedom with his family, he'd changed his mind. "The agreement was that I would have full civil liberties and travel freely as I wish," he said, reiterating his desire -- which he adopted shortly after leaving the embassy -- to flee to the U.S.

The Chen roller-coaster has taken many ups and downs over the past 48 hours, and it's taken the U.S.-China relationship -- maybe the most important diplomatic link in the world today -- with it, every turn by harrowing turn. First his stay at the embassy was a slap in Beijing's face and potential geopolitical crisis, then his departure under a carefully negotiated U.S.-China deal was a humble but important breakthrough, later his declaration that he'd been misled into taking the deal was a grave American mistake, and now his request for the U.S. to take him out of China is yet another slap to Beijing and opportunity for diplomatic meltdown.

Chen, who grew up in rural Shandong province when rural China was still one of the poorest places on Earth, is a courageous activist and a self-made man; he is not particularly worldly. Yet he's on the world stage now, whether he wants to be or not, and as more than just an activist. Having elevated his mistreatment to the U.S. embassy, he is, for this brief moment, a major player in the great power politics of the Pacific. His declarations, demands, and denouncements are now a subject of the U.S. presidential race and a major issue (if largely unspoken, in public anyway) of the high-level U.S.-China talks for which Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner are both in Beijing.

This a man who has done amazing things with his life, pushing against horrific abuses by a government that is not fond of dissent, but his battlegrounds have been very different than the one he's on today. After what must have been an exhilarating escape, and a stay at the U.S. embassy that by all accounts had Chen at his cheeriest, he is back in the hands of the same Chinese government whose police recently threatened to beat his wife to death (though the state is far from monolithic). And he's scared. "I feel my family members aren't very safe in China," he told the Wall Street Journal.

Tellingly, Chen also seemed surprised by the idea that he would not be allowed to return to the embassy, and thus leave China for the U.S., at any point. "The U.S. embassy never said whether or not I could go back after getting out of the hospital," he said. "But I'm a free citizen. If something happens, of course I could go to the embassy." Few, if any, observers seem to believe that Chinese authorities, who kept him under house arrest for years, would allow him to return to

the embassy. Chen is a remarkable and brave man, but at moments like this, he can also seem a bit naive, and that's not irrelevant to how his case is developing.

Throughout this episode, Chen has shown two consistent traits that don't seem to be helping him: an odd optimism about his situation, no matter how dire it gets; and a politically insensitive willingness to say whatever he thinks. His requests to fly to America on Hillary Clinton's plane, or to travel freely to a from the U.S. embassy building, show that he may not fully grasp the gravity of his situation. His comments first thanking U.S. embassy officials, then chiding them, then insisting it had been a "misunderstanding" are probably not going to deter those officials from helping him. But the same political insensitivity toward the Chinese government -- which is never thrilled to hear dissidents insisting that they be allowed to leave for the U.S., or accusing the state of violating their rights -- could risk some of the unusual goodwill China has shown. The deal that China agreed to for Chen is, by China's extremely low standards, surprisingly not bad. Within the Chinese government, some hard-line officials would probably like to see Chen thrown back under house arrest, and the activist is unwittingly helping those officials build their case.

Chen's sudden urgency about leaving China could be due in part to his claims that U.S. embassy officials are no longer answering his phone calls, and that the officials did not stay with him at the Beijing hospital overnight as promised. The U.S. embassy appears to be doing what it can to keep up with Chen's shifting requests. When he was in the embassy, he wanted to stay in China, and they negotiated an imperfect -- he will not be totally free, and it's possible Chinese authorities could renege on their promises -- but still landmark deal for him to stay. Now that he's out, he says he wants to travel to the U.S., and though it's very difficult to see a way for the embassy to pull this off, officials say they're doing their best to negotiate with Chinese authorities.

At this point, the U.S. may be at or near the limits of its power to help Chen. China is a powerful and sovereign country, and one particularly unwelcome to Western dictates. Its treatment of dissident activists is among the worst in the world, but the U.S. has somehow managed to secure a deal that, although it has little way of guaranteeing Chinese state cooperation, is far better than years of house arrest. Chen seems surprised and disappointed that the U.S. did not live up to his lofty sense of American power and ideals.

Somehow, in a country that drills into would-be activists that they should abandon hope and shut their mouths, Chen is still optimistic and still determined to speak his mind. Those traits may have made him a great activist in a country that badly needs them. But they are not helping him navigate the great-power politics that he's been thrust into. He is stuck between the two most powerful states in the world, stuck in the middle of a much larger U.S.-China conversation about human rights that has been running since President Clinton reopened the relationship in the mid-1990s. He has to figure out how to navigate all of this as a blind idealist from rural China, sitting in a Beijing hospital and worrying about his family's safety. Of all the many challenges he's faced in his life, this may be the biggest.

SOCIAL MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

Trending topics include Secretary Clinton's remarks at the S & ED presser and the real fate of Chen. China-based journalists are waiting for actions to confirm PRC Government statements that Chen can study abroad. Cynicism about the presser – potentially pre-screened questions, only two on Chen – is also part of the Twitter conversation this morning.

Reporters and bloggers on Twitter are also starting to break the contents of the draft statement from Spokesperson Nuland. Two main points they keep tweeting (in Chinese and English):

- 1) Chen has been offered a fellowship by a U.S. university with his wife and two kids.
- 2) USG expects the Chinese gov't to expeditiously process his applications for travel documents.

Relevant tweets:

@adriennemong (NBC News in London and Beijing), @markmackinnon (Asia Correspondent for Globe & Mail), and @taniabranigan (China correspondent from the Guardian) live-tweeted Secretary Clinton's remarks from the presser.

@adrienne mong

Clinton/Geithner presser wraps. Shorter than previous ones at S+ED I can remember. Only 2 q's on Chen Guangcheng

@markmackinnon

Weibo exploding with complaints as Hilary's motorcade further snarls Beijing traffic on a Friday night...

It seems too early to say there's a deal on Chen Guangcheng's fate. Clinton spoke of progress and intentions, not of a pact or understanding

@taniabranigan

RT @NiuB: Chen Guangcheng can apply to study abroad, China says | guardian bit.ly/IO4MVq by @taniabranigan & @ewenmacaskill

@PhelimKine – Human Rights Watch, China Focus

#China govt stmt on #Chenguangcheng passport eligibility encouraging, but too ambiguous. Talk is cheap. Verifiable *action* essential.

Note: The next media summary will be at 4 pm EDT/ 4 am Beijing.