

RELEASE IN
PART B6

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Friday, May 4, 2012 9:08 PM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Chen Media Summary As of May 4, 2012 8:00 p.m. EDT / 0800 Beijing

From: Hammer, Michael A
Sent: Friday, May 04, 2012 08:30 PM
To: Mills, Cheryl D; Campbell, Kurt M; Sullivan, Jacob J; Nuland, Victoria J; Kritenbrink, Daniel J (Dan) (Beijing); Baer, Daniel B; Posner, Michael H; Moy, Kin W; Carlson, Aubrey A; Wang, Robert S (Beijing); Patel, Nirav S
Cc: Hammer, Michael A; Paradiso, Darragh T; Marchant, Christian M; Okediji, Aleta T (Beijing)
Subject: Re: Chen Media Summary As of May 4, 2012 8:00 p.m. EDT / 0800 Beijing

From: Mike Hammer [mailto:]
Sent: Friday, May 04, 2012 08:24 PM
To: Hammer, Michael A
Subject: Chen Media Summary As of May 4, 2012 8:00 p.m. EDT / 0800 Beijing

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SUMMARY OF MEDIA COVERAGE

(As of May 4, 2012 8:00 p.m. EDT / 0800 Beijing, prepared by PA)

Coverage of Chen Guangcheng continues to diminish, with evening news broadcasts no running it as the top story. The focus is on the "apparent resolution" with reports noting that he will come to study in the US, citing New York University. There are some post-mortem assessments about the outcome, with some pieces noting it is "saving face" for both countries, and giving some credit to Secretary Clinton for leading a marathon effort to resolve what could have been an all-out crisis. Nevertheless, reports are still cautious about whether the deal will hold. There is some criticism that the US acted hastily to hand him back. Some Chinese media reports characterize Chen as a "traitor" for wanting to study in the U.S. All carried Secretary's remarks today.

Editorial commentary is light so far. Of note, the **NYT website features a 2 minute video clip by op-ed columnist Nicholas Kristof on "whether the Obama administration mishandled the case of Chen Guangcheng.**

According to Kristof: Diplomats did a reasonably good job negotiating a possible solution to a situation that could have dragged on for months, hobbling US-China relations. Some criticism of the Administration for mishandling seemed partisan and ill-founded. For example, the Chinese government would never have provided written guarantees as some had said. What's at stake: This is not just one lawyer but about human rights across China. The change of leadership in China this fall gives some reason to think new leadership will be more moderate. And Chen might become a folk hero which bodes well for day when people like Chen are not in prison but leading their country to a better future.

EVENING NEWS SUMMARIES

CBS – Evening News with Scott Pelley

Clips of the Secretary's press conference, cover offer from NYU. Deal "seems to meet with his latest demands." Chen alone has pushed Human Rights to the forefront of US/China talks, something that China usually keeps under wraps. Characterized Gary Locke as "bragging" about Mission Impossible move. Interviewed Cohen in New York, who said Americans don't usually pay attention to Chinese government policies so Chen may not be able to make that much difference here in US.

ABC – World News with Diane Sawyer

Only short mention after top 4 stories, Diane Sawyer noting that international crisis appears to be ending, with Chen coming to the US to study. The Chinese government agreed to let him go with his family and the State Department expects it to happen within weeks.

NBC – Nightly News with Brian Williams

Brief mention of Administration critics who said US was too hurried in its diplomacy. Rep. Chris Smith noted in clip that Chen should have been given more time at the embassy.

4th news story with Brian Williams noting that a day of diplomatic drama, with marathon negotiations led by Secretary Clinton, appeared to end with a way out of the crisis -- Chen on his way to study in the US. Andrea Mitchell then filed a report noting that there was an apparent breakthrough, as both sides are eager to avoid an all out crisis. Brief clip of Secretary Clinton noting that US officials visited him in the hospital and he now wants to go to the US. If deal holds, Mitchell concluded, he could be in US a student visa in a matter of weeks.

CNN – Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer

Not top story. Stan Grant: Covered S's statements. NYU visiting scholar offer, reports people trying to visit Chen in hospital were beaten; "Chen's fate at a center of a firestorm. Diplomacy continues to be tested." Critical of U.S. handing back "enemy of the state" to the Chinese Government and that nothing is really reaching the Chinese people.

CNN - John King USA with Stan Grant and Jill Dougherty

Clips of S presser. Questions about student visa process. Grant reports extent of threat wasn't clear to Chen until he walked out of embassy. Jill reports that S was doing a lot of work behind the scenes, very fast-moving, direct talk to top leadership at summit. Will China uphold its bargain? Jill: Chinese media is reporting that the 'traitor' will be going to US for school, so it looks promising.

SOCIAL MEDIA HIGHLIGHTS

On Twitter, chatter about CGC has died down. The limited reporting focuses on details surrounding any "deal" with the Chinese government on CGC and how the diplomatic process played out over the past few days.

Relevant tweets:

@blakehounshell - Managing editor of Foreign Policy magazine (37,000+ followers)

Chen confidant Jerome Cohen: No U.S.-China 'agreement' on Chen's fate http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/04/chen_confidant_no_us_china_agreement_on_blind_activists_fate

@cnnjill - Foreign Affairs Correspondent CNN (6,172 followers)

A diplomatic mess played out through a multimedia prism security.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/04/a-d... #cnn

SELECT ARTICLES FROM MAJOR OUTLETS

Washington Post

Prominent legal scholar and China expert comes to aid of Chen Guangcheng

May 4, 2012

5:38 PM EDT

By Daniel de Vise and William Wan

The man who plotted Chen Guangcheng's possible escape from China to study law at New York University is a veteran legal scholar who shares the activist's passion for chiding Chinese officials when they fail to follow their own laws.

When Chen weighed his options inside the U.S. Embassy this week after fleeing house arrest, he told American officials there was one adviser he could trust: Jerome Cohen, 81, an NYU law professor who is considered the godfather of Chinese legal studies in the United States.

They spoke multiple times by phone, and Chen eventually accepted Cohen's invitation to defuse a global political crisis by coming to America as a visiting scholar at NYU's U.S.-Asia Law Institute. It was Cohen's idea and a typically elegant solution: By departing China as a traveling scholar rather than an asylum-seeker, Chen would spare both governments political shame.

"This has been a hectic 72 hours," Cohen said Friday, speaking by telephone from his New York home, hoarse from a cold. "But it's coming out well, I hope. You know, I'm an eternal optimist."

Cohen, known for his mustache and bow tie, is regarded as a towering figure in Sino-American legal relations, with credentials befitting the political elite.

The son of a New Jersey lawyer, Cohen graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Yale, graduated at the top of his Yale Law School class and clerked for two U.S. Supreme Court justices. He taught law at the University of California at Berkeley and Harvard University, where he founded the United States' first East Asia legal studies program.

"There's probably not anybody teaching today who wasn't either Jerry's student or someone he impacted in some way," said Adam Segal, a senior fellow and colleague at the Council on Foreign Relations, where Cohen is an adjunct senior fellow.

Cohen embraced China in an era when the nation and its legal system were not yet deemed worthy of serious attention. He learned Mandarin in the basement of his Berkeley home and became the first Western lawyer to practice in Beijing, according to a profile in the NYU law school magazine. By chance, Cohen shares a birthday with that of the Chinese Communist Party.

"I just knew that China was going to be very important to our future, and its law was going to be very important to our interaction," he said.

Human rights was always on Cohen's radar; in recent years, it has moved toward the center of his agenda.

Cohen has leveraged his diplomatic stature to help negotiate the release of several political prisoners, including Kim Dae-jung, who later was president of South Korea and a Nobel Peace Prize winner, and Annette Lu, who would rise to be vice president of Taiwan, according to the university profile.

Kenneth Lieberthal, a China expert from the Brookings Institution, recalled a function he attended with Cohen "where a former student walked up him and said, 'Jerry, it's amazing, you've built a career teaching around Chinese law. But as you seem to point out in books, there is no Chinese law.' In that funny way he has, he simply said, 'Yes.'"

Rather than judge China by Western standards, Cohen's usual tack is to press Chinese officials to adhere to their own laws. He succeeds, colleagues say, on the strength of his reputation.

"I think China understands that to deny access to Professor Cohen would send such a negative signal around the world that they just can't afford to do it," said Jared Genser, a human rights lawyer who has collaborated with Cohen. "He's that important."

Cohen, who met Chen in 2004, was drawn to the blind, self-taught lawyer partly because he shared Cohen's knack for challenging Chinese authorities over legal abuses. Chen was incarcerated after filing suit on behalf of women who underwent forced sterilizations and forced abortions, both of which are forbidden by Chinese law. "I'm interested in, and he's interested in, trying to improve the Chinese legal system," Cohen said. "And obviously, there's room for improvement."

The two hadn't spoken in several years when Cohen took a call Monday morning from Chen's American advisers, who said Chen had named Cohen as "the only person he could trust," Cohen said.

Chen's first plan was to relocate with his family from their walled-in farmhouse to a Chinese university so that he could begin formal study of the law. "He didn't want to leave China; he didn't want to give up his important work," Cohen said.

He advised Chen that he should accept the deal only if President Obama personally made "some endorsing statement," so that all parties would honor it.

But then, Chen changed his mind: he wanted to leave the country to ensure his family's safety.

Cohen said he played no direct role in the second round of negotiations between U.S. and Chinese officials, "except Chen knew that I would invite him" to come to NYU. Cohen had assumed that journey might happen in a year or two. Now, he said, "I suppose the whole thing can be done in a month."

As a visiting scholar, Chen would receive a salary, likely paid by the Chinese government. The visit would probably be limited to a few months, Cohen said.

"He'll get a start toward the legal education he's always wanted," he said.

AP

US, China Forge Tentative Deal on Chinese Activist

By Matt Lee

BEIJING (AP) — With a series of quickly choreographed steps, the U.S. and China outlined a tentative deal Friday to send a blind legal activist to America for study and potentially bring a face-saving end to a delicate diplomatic crisis.

The arrangements, if kept, promise to give Chen Guangcheng much of what he wanted: a chance to live with his family in safety and to get a formal legal education. It would also allow Washington and Beijing to put aside a rancorous human rights dispute to focus on managing their rivalry for global influence.

As part of the deal, China's Foreign Ministry said Chen can apply for travel permits to study abroad. The State Department said an American university — later identified as New York University — has offered a fellowship for Chen with provisions for his family. Spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the U.S. expects Beijing to process the travel permits quickly, and once done, visas would be issued.

"I don't think this is empty talk here. I think they mean this is a way out, and it's a dignified way out. It's a good way out for the Chinese government and our government and for Chen and his family," said Jerome Cohen, an NYU law professor who met Chen nearly a decade ago, advised him during the negotiations and arranged the fellowship.

In a sign that not all was settled, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton offered a guarded assessment.

"Over the course of the day, progress has been made to help him have the future that he wants, and we will be staying in touch with him as this process moves forward," said Clinton, who was in Beijing for annual strategic talks.

The progress, however, seemed significant after a bizarre, rocky crisis triggered when Chen, an inspirational figure in China's human rights movement, escaped from house arrest in his rural home and reached the U.S. Embassy in Beijing last Friday. First saying he wanted to stay in China, a smiling Chen emerged from the fortress-like embassy to a hospital reunion with his wife and two children only to say hours later that he changed his mind.

In cell phone calls from his hospital room with friends and foreign media, he said he and his family felt unsafe and he wanted to go abroad, undoing a deal U.S. and Chinese officials worked out to guarantee their safe relocation to a city in China where he could study law.

"My situation right now is very dangerous," Chen told The Associated Press early Friday. On Thursday, he dialed into a congressional hearing to make a direct appeal for Clinton's help.

The drama unfolded but did not derail the two days of talks by Clinton, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and their Chinese counterparts on irritants that bedevil U.S.-China relations: trade, Iran's and North Korea's nuclear programs, conflict in Syria and cyber-spying.

"This week has shown again that we cannot wall off human rights from our bilateral relationship or relegate it to the margins of our engagement," Clinton said at the end of the talks.

Much could still upend the agreement. A key problem is where Chen and his family would pick up their passports. Returning to their home town, the usual route, would expose them to possible retribution from the same local officials who illegally put Chen and his family under house arrest to punish him for exposing forced abortions and other misdeeds carried out as part of China's one-child policy. Applying directly to the police ministry, which issues passports, is allowed in some cases.

Authorities could still deny Chen by law if it's determined that he "will undermine national security or cause major losses to the interests of the state."

"This has been used to deny passports to people who will hurt China's image," said John Kamm, a veteran human rights campaigner. Among those denied passports is Tibetan writer Tsering Wooser.

Chen could not be reached for comment. The cell phone he had used for days was switched off.

Still there were signs that his treatment was improving. After being unable to meet with U.S. officials for the better part of two days, Chen was allowed to meet with embassy staff and an American doctor.

Medical checkups showed his health is good except for three broken bones in his foot suffered when he was escaping from his rural village, a senior State Department official said.

Hospital staff brought his children new clothes, cut their hair and gave his son, Kerui, a present for his birthday, the official said. The son, who lived with relatives during the family's recent house arrest, is believed to be around 10, family friends said, a vagueness that is typical in rural China where birthdays are traditionally celebrated at the Lunar New Year.

Chinese officials have also begun talking to Chen about his mistreatment by officials in his home province, Shandong, the U.S. Embassy said. As part of the agreement that originally brought Chen out of the embassy, U.S. officials said China had agreed to look into his complaints.

Chen spent nearly all of the past seven years in prison or under house arrest. During the past 20 months of home confinement with his wife, mother and 6-year-old daughter Kesi, Chen has said local officials and people they hired beat the adults, followed and searched the girl and humiliated them.

At a briefing shortly after the Foreign Ministry said Chen could apply to go abroad, spokesman Liu Weimin also confirmed that Chen faces no pending criminal charges, indirectly acknowledging that the house arrest he and his family endured in their rural home was illegal.

"According to Chinese laws, he is a regular citizen. He can absolutely go through regular formalities by normal means," Liu said.

Should China permit the Chens to travel, it's unclear when they would go. Authorities have up to 30 days to consider a passport application, and Cohen, the NYU professor, said he hopes to see them by summer. Also left unresolved is whether Beijing will refuse to allow them back, as it has done with some dissidents.

Senior State Department officials, briefing reporters about the arrangements, said the question of Chen's return to China did not come up in negotiations with Chinese officials.

BBC, Beijing News

By Michael Bristow

May 4, 2012

US expects dissident Chen Guangcheng to leave China soon.

Mr Chen initially said he wanted to stay in China, but changed his mind

The US says it expects China to allow prominent dissident Chen Guangcheng to travel abroad soon.

The US state department said Mr Chen had been offered a fellowship at an American university, and it would allow his wife and children to accompany him.

Earlier, Beijing said the blind activist could apply to study abroad - paving the way for a resolution to a tense diplomatic stand-off with the US.

Mr Chen fled house arrest last month and spent six days in the US embassy.

He left but now says he wants to go to the US with his family.

His case has overshadowed high-level US-China talks taking place in Beijing.

US State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said in a statement that Mr Chen had been offered a fellowship from an American university - later identified as New York University (NYU).

She said Mr Chen could be accompanied by his wife and children, and that the US expected Beijing to process their application for travel "expeditiously".

"The United States government would then give visa requests for him and his immediate family priority attention," the statement added.

US and China close to deal on Chen

Jerome Cohen, an NYU law professor who arranged the fellowship, was quoted as saying by the Associated Press news agency: "It's a good way out for the Chinese government and our government and for Chen and his family."

Earlier, Xinhua news agency quoted foreign ministry spokesman Liu Weimin as saying: "If he wishes to study overseas, as a Chinese citizen, he can, like any other Chinese citizens, process relevant procedures with relevant departments through normal channels in accordance with the law."

Following an annual strategic dialogue between the US and China, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she was "encouraged" by the Chinese statement.

"Progress has been made to help him have the future he wants," she told a news conference in Beijing.

Mrs Clinton also confirmed that the US ambassador in Beijing had spoken to Mr Chen by phone on Friday, and that an embassy doctor had been able to visit him.

Media attack

The dissident is currently in a Beijing hospital, sealed off by Chinese police.

Mr Chen spent a week in the US embassy after escaping from house arrest for more than a year-and-a-half. He left the embassy on Wednesday after accepting China's assurances of his safety.

Clinton: "This is... about the human rights and aspirations of a billion people."

He later said that in view of the threats against his family, he had decided to leave the country.

He told the Associated Press news agency that his wife was being followed and filmed by unidentified men whenever she was allowed to leave the hospital.

China had earlier demanded an apology from the US for sheltering Mr Chen in its embassy.

One of China's main official newspapers, the Beijing Daily, accused the dissident of being "a tool and a pawn for American politicians to blacken China".

In another development, the Chinese authorities have told some foreign correspondents covering the Chen story they may lose their visas if they breach regulations again.

The police warning came after the journalists, thought to number about 20, were accused of entering the hospital where Mr Chen is being treated without permission.

Mr Chen, 40, is a lawyer who has campaigned against forced abortions and sterilisations of women under China's policy of one child per family.

The case has increasing political resonance in the US. Republican presidential hopeful Mitt Romney has said that if reports that Mr Chen had been persuaded to leave the embassy were true, it was "a day of shame for the Obama administration".

The Cable

Chen confidant: No U.S.-China 'agreement' on blind activist's fate

By Josh Rogin

May 4, 2012

There is no firm Chinese government agreement to allow blind Chinese activist Chen Guangcheng leave China to study in the United States, only two statements by the two governments and hopes that everything will work out fine, according to Chen's legal mentor and confidant Jerome Cohen.

In a long interview Friday with The Cable, Cohen expressed optimism that the latest twist in the Chen saga, whereby the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a statement suggesting that Chen can leave China but doesn't promise anything, will lead to a salvation for Chen and his family.

"If he wishes to study overseas, as a Chinese citizen, he can, like any other Chinese citizens, process relevant procedures with relevant departments through normal channels in accordance to the law," Xinhua quoted Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Weimin as saying Friday.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in her own remarks, praised the statement.

"We are also encouraged by the official statement issued today by the Chinese government confirming that he can apply to travel abroad for this purpose. Over the course of the day, progress has been made to help him have the future that he wants, and we will be staying in touch with him as this process moves forward," she said.

"Now things look brighter," Cohen told The Cable in a Friday afternoon interview, compared with Chen's situation earlier in the week. "When I saw that this morning, I thought this was great news and it seems to be a way out."

There may be private understandings between the two governments. But nothing is assured, Cohen said, and the Chinese government's statement was not the same as a promise, much less a bilateral agreement to do anything for Chen.

"The first question I asked is: What form will this take? Will this be in writing by the Chinese? At what level? The form that was contemplated was not that conventional. It was going to more like the Shanghai communiqué. One side says something and the other side doesn't say anything," Cohen said.

But Cohen was nonetheless upbeat, explaining that in the U.S.-China relationship, having the two sides make two unilateral statements and then act as if there were an agreement is a time-honored tradition.

"This is the real world and the way nations deal with each other," Cohen said.

Cohen, a law professor at New York University, said that NYU would provide an invitation for Chen to be a visiting scholar but that reports of a "fellowship" are incorrect, leaving open the question of who will pay for Chen and his family to live and study in the United States -- if, that is, he is actually allowed to go.

"I run a budget; I know about slender academic resources. I don't have the money to support him and his family at the moment and I can't commit to that at this point. Hopefully if push comes to shove I could raise it," Cohen said. "I can't assume he will necessarily come to NYU. It's very likely, but many law schools would likely welcome him as a guest."

Chen consulted with Cohen directly and often during his six-day stay in the embassy before agreeing to the terms of the first U.S.-brokered understanding with the Chinese government, under which Chen and his

immediate family would be allowed to live freely in China and Chen would be able to study at a Chinese university.

Cohen was always skeptical of that deal and had recommended to Chen that he should reject the deal and elect to stay inside the U.S. embassy indefinitely, he disclosed.

"Neither option was attractive. Though he wanted to stay in China, he was very fearful to make the choice to accept the arrangement that the U.S. and China had agreed upon," said Cohen. "I said to Chen 'Look, you are in no position to take this offer. Just tell them you will stay in the embassy and take your chances.'"

On the morning of May 2, Chen had nonetheless decided to take the deal because he had been informed that the Chinese government, through the Americans, had made it clear if he stayed in the embassy he would not be reunited with his wife and children.

"Tough pool, there," Cohen said, referring to the Chinese gamesmanship. Cohen also said Chen wanted to continue his work in China if at all possible. "Only 40 years old, did he want to exile himself from the country so that he would be ineffectual both in America and in China?"

Cohen told Chen May 2 that the strength of the Chinese assurances rested on the engagement of senior U.S. officials, namely President Barack Obama and Clinton. If they spoke out about the deal, he believed, the Chinese government would have to take it seriously.

"Chen said he would go for the deal if Obama would say something about it," Cohen said.

Clinton's statement supporting the deal fulfilled that request, as far as Cohen was concerned, though Obama has yet to make a statement.

Cohen also said he was cognizant of the fact that the issue was fast becoming a political football in the United States and that Obama was under pressure to help out Chen.

"I knew Obama would sooner or later have to say something. How was he going to fight a campaign and respond to attacks by Romney? By sitting in silence?"

Chen also took a call from his wife before leaving the embassy, Cohen said, wherein his wife expressed her support for the idea of staying in China but did not mention the harassment and abuse she had been subjected to since Chen's escape.

Based on all of those factors, Chen decided to take the deal.

"Everything's fine, he gets in the car, everything's lovey-dovey. He gets a call from Hillary. He's exhilarated," Cohen said. "Then he gets to the hospital and over the next few hours the environment changes drastically. That's when things took a turn for the worse."

Not only was Chen disoriented and hungry when he first arrived at the hospital, he began receiving phone calls from activist friends who told him he had made a mistake in taking the deal and that he was a fool to think the Chinese government would hold up its end of the bargain.

The Americans should have kept somebody there, Cohen said, noting that the place was infested with secret police, including some of those that escorted Chen's wife and children from their locality.

"His human rights friends start calling him and saying 'Are you crazy, get out of here, they will never fulfill the terms of this crazy deal,'" Cohen said.

Fellow activist Hu Jia's wife called and said "This is terrible, don't accept this," according to Cohen. It was she whose tweets first alerted the international media to Chen's change of heart.

At that moment, Chen started getting calls from the AP and other media and Chen and his wife decided they wanted to leave China after all. Unfortunately, some of the statements Chen made to the media made it seem as though he was criticizing the embassy and that he was coerced to leave the embassy, which wasn't Chen's intention, according to Cohen.

By the next day, Chen had been reached by more moderate activists, who informed Chen how the impression abroad was that Chen was criticizing the embassy. Chen then sought to clarify his position, including with a dramatic call into a congressional hearing, that he was not seeking "asylum" -- only a "rest" in the United States.

The following day, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued its statement, notably free of any of its previous condemnations of the United States.

In a Friday background briefing in Beijing, several reporters pressed two senior Obama administration officials on the lack of concrete, much less written, assurances by the Chinese government that Chen would be allowed to leave China.

"We are encouraged by the overall process, and we believe that steps will play out expeditiously," one official said, declining several times to define what timeline "expeditiously" means.

The officials said the United States would quickly approve a student visa application for Chen if one materialized. But the U.S. officials did not give any sense that the Chinese had committed to approving Chen's application to leave the country. They did say they agreed with the Chinese that the Chinese government had held up its side of the original deal.

"Let me just say on that we actually believe that the Chinese government was following through with the arrangements and the understandings that were undertaken. But what matters is what Mr. Chen felt and believed," another official said.

Also left unanswered is the fate of Chen's extended family and those who supported his escape. The officials said they were aware of it and that they were optimistic it would all be resolved constructively.

"We've had detailed conversations with Chinese interlocutors about concerns of his family, his friends, his colleagues back in Shandong, and others who have been involved in his pilgrimage to Beijing over the course of last week," one official said. "We believe that this process will proceed accordingly, and we have high confidence in its course."

Reuters

By Andrew Quinn and Terril Yue Jones

BEIJING, May 4 (Reuters) - China said on Friday that blind dissident Chen Guangcheng could apply to study abroad, a move praised by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and suggesting an end may be near to a diplomatic standoff between Beijing and Washington.

But rights activists sounded a note of caution, saying Beijing could move slowly on granting Chen permission to leave out of fear that appearing soft might embolden other challengers to Communist Party rule before a power handover late this year.

An announcement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry followed a dramatic and very public appeal by Chen, who spoke by phone to a U.S. congressional hearing on his case and asked to be allowed to spend time in the United States after fleeing 19 months of extra-judicial captivity in his home village.

"If he wants to study abroad, he can apply through normal channels to the relevant departments in accordance with the law, just like any other Chinese citizen," ministry spokesman Liu Weimin said in a brief statement, adding that Chen was still being treated in hospital.

Clinton, in Beijing for strategic and economic talks, said the U.S. ambassador to Beijing, Gary Locke, had spoken to Chen again on Friday when he had confirmed he wanted to go to the United States to study, along with his family.

"Over the course of the day, progress has been made to help him have the future that he wants and we will be staying in touch with him as this process moves forward," she said.

"This is not just about well-known activists; it's about the human rights and aspirations of more than a billion people here in China and billions more around the world and it's about the future of this great nation and all nations," Clinton added.

U.S. officials said they now expect American diplomats and doctors to have regular access to Chen, who campaigned against forced abortions under China's "one-child" policy.

They also said that checks had shown that Chen had three broken bones from his escape, and his foot was put in a cast.

UNIVERSITY FELLOWSHIP

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Chen had been offered a fellowship by a U.S. university, where he can be joined by his wife and two children. New York University said it had invited Chen to be a visiting scholar at its law school.

Nuland also said Washington expected Beijing to deal quickly with Chen's application to travel abroad. "The United States government would then give visa requests for him and his immediate family priority attention," she said in a statement.

While some activists said China could drag its feet on Chen, Bob Fu of the Texas-based advocacy group ChinaAid said in a statement on Friday that "Chen is so widely popular now, Beijing probably wants him in New York as soon as possible."

The crisis erupted on April 22, after Chen made a dramatic escape from his rural home, where he was effectively under house arrest, and made his way to Beijing and sought refuge at the U.S. Embassy.

He stayed there for six days until Wednesday when U.S. officials took him to a Beijing hospital after assurances from the Chinese government that he and his family would receive better treatment and could move out of Shandong province, where rights activists said they had suffered surveillance and abuse.

But within hours, Chen, 40, had changed his mind, scuppering what had seemed to be a delicately constructed deal between Chinese and U.S. diplomats to allow him to receive treatment for a broken foot, and be reunited with his wife and children.

Chen, in translated comments, also told the congressional that villagers who had helped him were "receiving retribution" and he was most concerned about the safety of his mother and brothers.

"Chen's frail mother remains detained, his brother Chen Guangfu and nephew Chen Kegui will be sentenced, and the netizens who helped Chen escape, like He "Pearl" Pierong, still face charges," ChinaAid, the main source of information about Chen while he was at the U.S. Embassy, said in a statement.

The issue cast a shadow over this week's visit to Beijing by Clinton for talks intended to improve ties between the world's two biggest economies.

Despite the friction, a U.S. official said China would raise foreign ownership limits in domestic joint-venture securities firms and allow them to trade commodities and financial futures in a move to further liberalise capital markets. Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner said China had also made significant reforms to its currency regime, long a bone of contention.

Clinton told Chinese President Hu Jintao ties were the strongest they had ever been. Nevertheless, Beijing has accused the United States of meddling in its affairs in the Chen case.

Chinese human rights lawyer Tang Jitian cautioned that the authorities could easily hold up the paperwork to delay Chen's departure from China. China's security forces might not be as keen as its diplomats for a quick exit.

"How it will play out we don't know. For instance, getting the approval for the paperwork to go, there are many potential pitfalls," said Tang. "We can't be 100-percent optimistic."

U.S. officials said they did not know when Chen might leave but said they had no reason to believe it would be this weekend.

STARBUCKS-SIPPING TROUBLEMAKER

The Obama administration has come under criticism for its handling of the matter, particularly from Republicans such as House Foreign Affairs Chairman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen.

"U.S. officials made a mistake by escorting Chen away from the safety of the U.S. embassy and into an uncertain fate," she said. "The State Department must press China to carry out its commitments. We cannot assume that this saga has been resolved."

Congressmen Chris Smith and Frank Wolf, both Republicans, hope to grill senior U.S. officials as soon as next week.

Chen himself was attacked by one of China's main official newspapers, which accused him of being a pawn of U.S. subversion of Communist Party power and described U.S. Ambassador Locke as a backpack-wearing, Starbucks-sipping troublemaker.

"Chen Guangcheng has become a tool and a pawn for American politicians to blacken China," the Beijing Daily said. The dissident's village remained under lockdown. Guards chased away two Reuters reporters who attempted to enter the village on Friday. The four heavy-set guards ran slowly, yelling at the reporters as their car drove away. The Chen case comes at a tricky time for China, which is engaged in a leadership change. The carefully choreographed transition has already been knocked out of step by the downfall of ambitious senior Communist Party official Bo Xilai in a scandal linked to the apparent murder of a British businessman.

The next media summary will be sent after the Sunday Shows, at noon EDT, 2130 Calcutta