

China Blocks Dissident Lawyers From Beijing Dinner Hosted by Congressmen

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BELJING, July 1 — A group of Chinese human rights lawyers were detained and later put under house arrest by government security officials to prevent them from attending a dinner hosted Sunday by two members of the U.S. Congress.

The incident is the latest in a series of moves by Chinese officials to clamp down on dissent in the run-up to the Summer Olympic Games, which open Aug. 8 in Beijing.

"The actions show an unhealthy brazenness in regards to human rights," Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.), a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in an interview Tuesday.

Smith and Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.) had invited several dissident lawyers to meet with them Sunday night but then learned that police had taken two lawyers from their homes that afternoon, driven them to a Beijing suburb and barred them from returning to the city. Police blocked another invitee from leaving his apartment complex and either warned off or barred at least six other invited lawyers, according to Chinese Human Rights Defenders, an advocacy group.

"China has regressed," Wolf said in an interview Tuesday, adding that there had been "absolutely, positively no progress" on human rights. At least three of the lawyers and a pastor, who was able to attend the dinner, are now under house arrest, Wolf said.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao criticized the congressmen for not respecting China's laws and regulations but refused to discuss what law prevented foreign officials from meeting with Chinese citizens.

"The two U.S. congressmen came

to China as guests of the United States Embassy to engage in internal communications and consultations," Liu told reporters in a regularly scheduled news conference Tuesday. "They should not engage in activities incompatible with the objective of their visit and with their status."

On the same evening that Wolf and Smith were supposed to dine with the activist lawyers, visiting Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hailed renewal of the U.S.-China human rights dialogue on May 26 as a step toward improving China's human rights record. Rice, who later dined with Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, told reporters Sunday she was reminding him that the United States would continue to make the issue of human rights a part of the increasingly close U.S.-China relationship.

Yang, at an upbeat Sunday news conference with Rice, said China also regarded resumption of the human rights dialogue as a sign of progress and expressed willingness to continue such discussions with the United States and other nations "on a basis of mutual respect."

Neither Yang nor Rice mentioned the lawyers who were being prevented from seeing Wolf and Smith. At that time, the details of the disrupted dinner were not widely known; it is unclear whether Yang was aware of them.

But the comments by him and Rice drew attention to the gap between what Chinese security forces do to quash dissent and what the Foreign Ministry and other public parts of the government tell foreign visitors about rule by law and human rights improvements in China.

The Chinese security apparatus, for instance, has tightened controls considerably ahead of the Olympics. Restrictions have been stepped up

on known dissidents and human rights activists, preventing them from expressing their views or from coming to Beijing if they live in other cities.

On Tuesday, a Chinese court sentenced a reporter for a U.S.-based online news site to four years in prison on charges of public disorder and possession of illegal weapons. Sun Lin, who used the pen name Jie Mu, wrote regularly on sensitive topics such as crime and police brutality for the Chinese-language site Boxun.

One of the lawyers invited to the Sunday dinner, Li Fangping, said three police officers had come to his house Sunday and prevented him from attending. The officers followed him wherever he went through Tuesday evening, Li said.

"I heard that after the Congress members board their plane, then they will stop following me," Li said. "I can't see the reason why they are doing this."

Smith said he and Wolf had decided to travel to Beijing when there was still time before the Olympics for China to demonstrate its commitment to human rights. They presented a list of 734 political prisoners to Li Zhaoxing, a former foreign minister who now chairs the foreign affairs committee of the National People's Congress, and appealed to him to work for their release.

"These dialogues are fine as long as they are not just public relations efforts," Smith said. "China has to have deeds to match its words."

Liu, the Foreign Ministry spokesman, said he had not seen the congressmen's list, but that presenting it was "not consistent with the purpose of their visit."

Researcher Liu Liu contributed to this report.