

Visiting US ambassador calls on China to release Taiwanese activist

Written by Taipei Times

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A visiting US official responsible for religious freedom yesterday urged the Chinese government to release jailed Taiwanese democracy activist Lee Ming-che (李明哲), who is serving a five-year prison term in China on charges of subversion of state power.

US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, who is visiting Taiwan for a regional religious freedom forum, the first of its kind, made the call during a news briefing in Taipei after a meeting with Lee's wife, Lee Ching-yu (李靜瑜).

Lee Ming-che has been detained in China since March 2017 and serving a five-year prison term since being convicted in November of that year of subversion of state power.

Since then, his wife has been visiting worldwide human rights watchdogs to rally support to jointly call on Beijing for his swift release.

During Tuesday's briefing, which he attended with Lee Ching-yu, Brownback said that this is the second time in less than two months that he has met with her.

The previous meeting was in February, when Lee Ching-yu visited Washington.

Describing the case as being of high concern for the US government, he said a human rights advocate such as Lee Ming-che should not be incarcerated, but should be set free, especially as his health is deteriorating.

According to Lee Ching-yu, Lee Ming-che has lost about 30kg, must perform forced labor and is fed spoiled food in a prison in Hunan Province. She has not been able to meet with her husband since December last year, her last visit to the prison.

"This is not something that is happening to him alone, but to every prisoner in that prison," she

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said.

She expressed gratitude to the US government for their concern about her husband's incarceration, but warned that this kind of threat over human right advocates does not target only Taiwan, but the whole world.

The US official affirmed that his government believes that Lee Ming-che should be set free, and called on the Chinese government to release him.

Asked about what concrete plan the US has to persuade China to release Lee, Brownback said that the US continues to look at "additional concrete steps if action is not taken [on China's part]."

He said that the standard operating procedure on the US side concerning such cases is that Washington would first try to solve the issue "quietly and privately."

"If that does not work, we will raise public pressure on the case. If that does not work, then we take the next step, which is often to look at what specific action we can take," he said.

He used as an example the case of US pastor Andrew Brunson, who was detained in Turkey for nearly two years over alleged links to political groups.

The US government later imposed sanctions on Turkey over the case until the latter ultimately released the pastor in October last year.

In the case of Lee Ming-che, Brownback said that the US is still at the stage of raising awareness over his imprisonment to put pressure on China.

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He admitted that he is “deeply concerned” about Lee’s rapidly deteriorating condition.

This is the first time that Brownback has visited Taiwan. The visit is scheduled to conclude today.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Brownback was a strong supporter of Taiwan long before he assumed office as a US ambassador-at-large on Feb. 1 last year.

He was a member of the US Senate Taiwan Caucus and hosted a Taiwanese agricultural mission when he served as governor of Kansas, the ministry said.

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