

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 20, 2013

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
2201 C St NW Ste 7276
Washington DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry:

We write regarding the case of American pastor, Saeed Abedini -- a U.S. citizen currently languishing in Tehran's notorious Evin Prison. As you know, the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission convened a hearing last week on the state of religious freedom, or lack thereof, in Iran. We heard compelling testimony from a number of witnesses about the abysmal plight of religious minorities in Iran, including Baha'is, Jews, Christians and Sufi Muslims, among others. Katrina Lantos Swett, whose father, the late Rep. Tom Lantos, is the namesake of the commission, shared photos of some of Iran's prisoners of conscience—thereby putting actual faces on these abuses, and reminding all present that Iran's utter disregard for religious liberty takes a very real human toll.

That human toll was nowhere more evident than in the tearful account of Naghmeh Abedini, wife of Pastor Abedini. Hers was expert testimony of a different sort — that of a wife and mother whose husband has been unjustly imprisoned, tortured and denied his basic human rights.

Members sat with rapt attention listening to her story — the challenge of explaining to her children where their father has gone while grappling with the reality that for Saeed, “every day is a death sentence.” As a father yourself, we are sure you can imagine this young family's pain.

There was a palpable sense of disappointment in the room that our government didn't deem the hearing important enough to provide a witness. After repeated requests from the Lantos Commission, which went unanswered for nearly a week, the State Department ultimately said that no one was available to provide testimony. Later that same day, Rep. Wolf's staff attended a meeting with Mrs. Abedini, her legal counsel and several senior State Department officials including the Ambassador for International Religious Freedom, all of whom would have been suitable witnesses for our hearing. In short, the department misled the commission and in so doing sent a dangerous message to rogue regimes the world over—even human rights abuses that compromise the safety and security of American citizens will be met with virtual silence from the U.S. government.

To date, the State Department's posture on this case has been woefully inadequate, especially given that the life of an American citizen hangs in the balance. Both the European Union and the United Nations (UN) special rapporteur on human rights in Iran have advocated publicly for Pastor Saeed—the same cannot be said of this administration. The State Department recently responded to a February 12 congressional letter, signed by over 80 senators and representatives, urging the department to exhaust every option in securing Pastor Abedini's release. The department stated, “We are disappointed that Mr. Abedini has been sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran on charges related to his religious beliefs...” Even the words chosen for this letter fail to convey an appropriate sense of urgency.

Let's be clear: We are "disappointed" that the department failed to provide a witness for Friday's hearing and have in fact left the hearing record open for a week to allow the State Department to provide written testimony, which to date we have not yet received. But like most Americans, we are outraged and appalled that the Iranian government has unjustly imprisoned an American citizen for his Christian faith.

You may recall that last Congress Rep. Wolf introduced bipartisan legislation, which overwhelmingly passed the House, to create a special envoy position at the State Department charged with advocating on behalf of religious minorities in the Middle East and South Central Asia—legislation which the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, under your leadership, failed to act upon. Representatives Wolf and Anna Eshoo have reintroduced the legislation this Congress (H.R. 301). Already it has garnered nearly 40 cosponsors. The bill singles out priority countries, of which Iran is one. Pastor Abedini's case and the countless others highlighted at last Friday's hearing underscore the importance of such a position—a high-level diplomat to advocate both within our own State Department and abroad.

We urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to make this case and the broader issue of religious freedom a priority as Secretary of State. The State Department should swiftly issue a public statement calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Pastor Abedini. Further, the department, preferably through a personal phone call from you to Naghmeh Abedini, should make it clear that the U.S. government will dedicate the full resources at its disposal to securing the freedom of Pastor Abedini—one of our own citizens.

Best wishes.

Sincerely,



Frank R. Wolf
Member of Congress



Trent Franks
Member of Congress



Michael K. Simpson
Member of Congress



Raúl R. Labrador
Member of Congress



Christopher H. Smith
Member of Congress