



**Statement of U.S. Representative Christopher Smith,
Chairman of the Congressional-Executive
Commission on China (CECC)**

CECC Roundtable on

**“The End of Reeducation Through Labor? Recent
Developments and Prospects for Reform”**

May 9, 2013, Washington, DC

Over the past several months, the Chinese government has suggested that reforms might soon come to China’s brutal re-education through labor (RTL) system. Under the current RTL system, Chinese officials can order Chinese citizens to be held in reeducation through labor centers for up to four years without a trial or legal representation. There are no judges, no defense attorneys, and no prosecutors. If the public security forces want to detain an individual for years without any judicial review, they have authority to do so. Detainees have little recourse.

China’s police forces have used this administrative system for decades to target “minor offenders,” whose crimes fall beneath the threshold of the Criminal Law. And, while the RTL system was created to “educate” minor offenders, Chinese police officials frequently use RTL to punish, among others, petitioners, dissidents, drug users, sex workers, Falun Gong practitioners, and individuals who belong to religious groups not approved by the government. The unchecked decisionmaking power has given China’s police forces an extra cudgel to wield against a range of so-called troublemakers and those brave citizens willing to advocate for change.

Once held within the RTL system, detainees are faced with a grim reality. They are forced to work long hours for little pay, often in unsafe working conditions. In addition, the detainees are sometimes subject to harassment or torture by officials—and even beatings by other inmates seeking shortened sentences. An April 2013 investigative article in a Chinese magazine highlighted cruel conditions in one of these camps. In the report on the Masanjia RTL detention center in northeast China’s Shenyang city, ex-detainees described a range of abuses, including harsh restraints, electric shocks, extended solitary confinement, and forced labor.

It is a nightmare that tens of thousands of Chinese citizens live with every day.

Of course, China’s RTL system is not the country’s only forced labor camp system. Prison inmates, throughout China, continue to be subjected to forced labor and harsh working environments. I recall one of my earliest visits to Beijing, where I was able to visit Beijing Prison No. 1, one of hundreds of the vast Laogai system, where jelly shoes

and socks were being made for export. We saw factory workers' heads shaved, very gaunt, and at least 40 Tiananmen Square activists in large vats with dye all over their bodies. Obviously, the dye is penetrating their skin and being absorbed into their systems. And we complained to the Administration that we knew, because we brought back the socks and the jelly shoes, that were being made by convict labor, including political prisoners, and it was showing up on our shores. An import ban was imposed and that place shut down, although I am sure they just relocated.

In recent months, stories of harsh work conditions and wrongful detentions have sparked public outrage and intensified calls for reforms. In response to controversial cases, Chinese citizens have taken to the Internet to voice opposition to the RTL system and to the corrupt practices. Citizens have also used popular social media and microblogging Web sites to express support for those detained unjustly. Even China's state-run publications have questioned the RTL system and its abuses. In response to the case of a young village official ordered to two years of RTL, the Global Times—an official publication under the People's Daily—wrote, "It's worrying that people can still be punished for expressing or writing critical thoughts in modern China. Ren's case is not an isolated one."

Officials appear to be listening. In March, China's new Premier Li Keqiang told a press conference in Beijing that RTL reforms may be unveiled before the end of the year. Other officials at lower-levels have similarly voiced support for RTL reforms or voiced their expectations for a timely end to this brutal system.

Still, today, tens of thousands of people languish in China's 350 RTL detention centers. Rhetoric is not enough.

China's new leaders should now act immediately to end reeducation through labor for once and for all. And, if they can have the courage to end this brutal and senseless system of arbitrary punishment, we commend them.

But, let's not forget: RTL orders are not the only form of arbitrary detention in China. Officials routinely use home confinement, harassment, torture and unofficial holding centers to silence those seeking to advocate for human rights or expose official abuses. Without a doubt, the outdated and cruel RTL system should be abolished immediately; however, the other forms of arbitrary detention and official harassment must end, as well.

Over the past few months, we have witnessed increasingly loud calls for reform and justice throughout China, as citizens have bravely and publicly called for an end to this arbitrary system of punishment and cruelty. Today, we are fortunate to have four expert panelists who can give us further insights into these developments and the potential for RTL reform. We look forward to hearing about the prospects for RTL reform and for other reforms that could end the arbitrary detention of Chinese citizens.