China Releases American Engineer After 17 Months

by Christopher Bodeen, Associated Press Writer

BEIJING (AP) — An American engineer held in China for more than a year on accusations he misused trade secrets has been released, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing said Friday.

Hu Zhicheng remains in China but plans to return home soon. The embassy said he was released late last month, but did not have an exact date.

Hu's 17-month detention in the port city of Tianjin appeared to be related to a business dispute over automobile technology. Hu told U.S. officials that investigators demanded he give the rights to a U.S.-registered patent he holds to a former business partner in Tianjin.

Following his detention in November 2008, he was held mainly in a group cell in a police jail.

Hu's predicament highlighted complaints that powerful Chinese businesses use relationships with law enforcement to pressure foreign rivals, especially those who, like Hu, who were born in China. A number of other Chinese-born foreign businessmen remain in custody in China or have been sentenced to prison on charges such as industrial espionage and bribery.

Hu left the country in the 1980s to further his education and career, earning a doctorate in chemical engineering in Japan and conducting research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on chemical agents used to help clean up automobile emissions.

After more than a decade working in the U.S., Hu moved back to China in 2004 to take advantage of a boom in the domestic auto industry. After a company his firm dealt with foundered, Hu's relations with it soured, although the exact nature of the dispute and accusations against him remain unclear.

Reached by phone at her California home, Hu's wife, Hong Li, said her husband had been released with no charges filed against him. She said he was issued a new U.S. passport and Chinese visa and their family was hoping to see him soon.

"He is not a criminal," Li said. "We need him to get home."

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