

The United States and Western countries have criticized “China’s ongoing problematic human rights record,” in an unprecedented joint statement issued Thursday during a United Nations Human Rights Council session in Geneva.

A U.S. State Department official told VOA this joint statement is “the first collective action taken regarding China at the Human Rights Council since its inception in 2007.”

The joint statement called recent cases of unexplained disappearances and apparent coerced returns of Chinese and foreign citizens from outside mainland China “unacceptable” extraterritorial actions, as well as “out of step” with the expectations of the international community and “a challenge to the rules based international order.”

Five Hong Kong booksellers, including owner Gui Minghai, have gone missing since last October. They were thought to have been abducted and taken into Beijing’s custody for selling literature banned in mainland China.

Earlier this month, two of the Causeway Bay bookshop employees were released briefly and allowed to return to Hong Kong. After they requested the police to drop their cases of missing persons, two booksellers were reported going straight back to the mainland.

The joint statement also expressed concern about the “increasing number of individuals whose confessions have been aired on state media” prior to any indictment or judicial process.

In late February, a prominent Chinese rights lawyer Zhang Kai confessed on state television to “disturbing social order.” He has been helping to defend Christians resisting authority’s orders to remove crosses from buildings. Zhang was arrested last year shortly before a planned meeting with the U.S. envoy on religious freedoms.

Following Zhang Kai’s purported confession, the State Department urged China to release Zhang and others “detained for seeking to peacefully uphold the freedom of religion guaranteed in China’s constitution.”

Human Rights Watch’s China director, Sophie Richardson, applauded the joint statement, saying it took an unprecedented and courageous stand condemning China’s relentless crackdown on human rights.

The joint statement was endorsed by the United States, Ireland, the U.K., Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Japan, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, Sweden and Finland.