



Congressional-Executive Commission on China

“A Son and Daughter’s Appeal to Xi Jinping to Release Their Dad, Jimmy Lai”

Co-chairman Christopher H. Smith

September 16, 2026

Today’s hearing is about Jimmy Lai—and an earnest appeal to Xi Jinping from Jimmy’s children to set him free on humanitarian grounds.

They are grateful that President Trump has personally raised Jimmy Lai’s release with Xi Jinping and respectfully ask him to do so again at the upcoming summit.

We will hear directly from Jimmy Lai’s son, Sebastien, speaking for himself and on behalf of his sister, Claire, who was initially scheduled to join her brother today. Sadly, Claire was [recently diagnosed](#) with an aggressive form of cancer and has begun treatment. We are thinking of her, praying for her, and wishing her a full recovery.

Sebastien, who [testified](#) on behalf of his father in 2023, will tell us today:

“My father learned of his own daughter's diagnosis from a maximum-security prison. He cannot hold her hand. She wants nothing more than to have him with her for this fight. We hope the Chinese authorities will consider what compassionate release would mean for her, and for a 78-year-old man who has already suffered enough...Let Jimmy Lai come home to his family and let him sit beside his daughter in her hardest moment.”

Jimmy Lai is 78 years old. He has spent six years in detention. In February, a Hong Kong court [sentenced him to 20 years](#) in prison following his conviction under the National Security Law. It was the longest sentence, thus far, imposed under that law.

For a man of Jimmy Lai's age, and given the serious concerns about his health, a 20-year sentence carries an obvious and deeply troubling humanitarian consequence. His son Sebastien has [described it](#) as a death sentence.

That is why time matters.

Jimmy Lai is not being imprisoned because he committed an act of violence. His son has emphasized that his father has never advocated violence. Rather, Jimmy Lai used his voice, his newspaper, and his public platform [to support freedom and democracy](#).

He founded Apple Daily, a newspaper that became one of Hong Kong's most prominent pro-democracy publications. The newspaper was forced to close in 2021 after authorities arrested its senior executives and froze its assets. Jimmy Lai himself was [arrested in August 2020](#) and subsequently prosecuted under Hong Kong's national security regime.

His case therefore raises fundamental questions about the meaning of freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Hong Kong today.

It also raises questions about the rule of law.

Hong Kong was promised a high degree of autonomy and the preservation of its existing legal and social systems under the "One Country, Two Systems" framework. Yet since the imposition of the National Security Law in June 2020, our [Commission has documented](#) the imprisonment of democracy advocates, journalists, former legislators, and civil society figures; weakened procedural protections; concerns regarding judicial independence; and a broader chilling effect on speech and political activity.

Jimmy Lai's case is [emblematic of those changes](#).

It is about whether a society can retain meaningful freedom of speech when criticizing those in power becomes a national-security offense.

It is about whether journalists can report freely when the government can shut down a newspaper and prosecute its publisher.

It is about whether courts can remain genuinely independent when national-security laws are used against political opponents and critics.

And it is about whether the promises made to the people of Hong Kong still have meaning.

We should also remember the human dimension of this case.

For about six years, Jimmy Lai's children have had to live with the reality that their father is imprisoned thousands of miles away. Sebastien has spoken publicly about the possibility that he may never see his father again.

Claire has [spoken](#) about her father's deteriorating health and the family's increasingly limited information about his medical condition.

Claire has also spoken about something that I think is important to understand about [Jimmy Lai: his faith](#). She has said that her father is not in prison because he is Catholic, but that his faith has been a major source of the courage he has shown throughout this ordeal. She described his trust in God and divine providence as something that has not wavered even as his physical condition has deteriorated.

That combination of faith and courage is part of Jimmy Lai's story.

He is a businessman who built a successful enterprise. He is a publisher who believed that people should be free to read, write, criticize, and debate. He is a Catholic who has spoken openly about his faith. And he is a father whose children are asking for the chance to have their dad home.

This hearing comes at an important moment.

The [Commission's announcement](#) notes the planned summit between President Trump and General Secretary Xi Jinping. That makes the appeal from

Jimmy Lai's children especially timely. They are asking that their father's freedom be addressed directly.

This hearing also comes at a moment when Congress is considering concrete steps to address the treatment of political prisoners in Hong Kong.

Today, I am introducing, along with Senator Sullivan, the **Jimmy Lai Hong Kong Political Prisoner Accountability Act of 2026** to establish a clear framework for accountability if a Hong Kong political prisoner were to die in custody as a result of inadequate medical care, abuse, inhumane conditions, or other actions or omissions by detaining authorities.

Under the bill, the Secretary of State, in coordination with the Secretary of the Treasury, would be required to determine whether such a death resulted from those circumstances and identify foreign officials responsible for or complicit in the conduct. Those officials could then face mandatory sanctions under existing authorities, including the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and the Hong Kong Autonomy Act.

The bill would also require the State Department to report to Congress on the health status of Jimmy Lai and other Hong Kong political prisoners, including any denial or restriction of medical care, legal access, consular access, or family contact.

And that broader requirement is important because many Hong Kongers remain imprisoned or targeted for exercising fundamental freedoms.

The National Security Law has had consequences affecting journalists, political candidates, legislators, activists, lawyers, religious figures, and ordinary citizens who have expressed views considered unacceptable by the authorities. Most recently, we witnessed the brave 29-year old democracy advocate, [Joshua Wong](#), pleading guilty to collusion with foreign entities, a charge that carries a maximum sentence of life in prison under Beijing's National Security Law.

The result of this law has been a profound change in Hong Kong's civic and political environment—and not for the better.

I want to close by returning to where I began: Jimmy Lai's children.

Sebastien and Claire have continued to speak because their father cannot.

Today, we have an opportunity to listen to their appeal for their father's freedom.

Jimmy Lai should be home.

He should be with his family. He should be by his daughter's side as she fights cancer—not behind bars, separated from the people who need him most, at a time when they need him now more than ever.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today and for sharing your testimony.