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Hearing on Faces of Repression: Prisoners, Families, and Communities Targeted by the Chinese Communist Party

Tuesday, September 22, 2026 – 2:30 p.m.

James P. McGovern
Commissioner, Congressional-Executive Commission on China

As delivered

I want to thank Co-Chair Smith and Chairman Sullivan for convening this hearing on prisoners of conscience.

I am sorry to have missed last week's hearing on Jimmy Lai. Co-Chair Smith has been a steadfast advocate for him. I add my voice to the many in Congress and beyond who call for his immediate release.

Every human being is born free and equal in dignity and rights as provided by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

We must constantly remind ourselves of this universal principle. We are confronted each day with news of the seemingly unending capacity of our fellow human beings to inflict harm on one another. It can seem overwhelming.

Perhaps one of the deepest fears a prisoner of conscience can suffer is the fear that they have been forgotten. That is why these events are so essential. That is why human rights work is so crucial -- to give those unjustly detained the chance to hear that people are fighting for their freedom.

Yesterday, I sent a letter, along with Senators Merkley and Van Hollen and Congressmen Suozzi and Walkinshaw, to the President with a list of prisoners of conscience to raise directly with President Xi. The letter named Jimmy Lai and Gulshan Abbas, among many more.

Behind any list of names are real human beings. People who cannot see their families, live in their homes, pursue their aspirations, or enjoy basic freedoms. People who cannot advocate for themselves or tell us their stories.

That is why we welcome our witnesses, to speak on behalf of their loved ones.

Pastor Jin, it is good to see you in the same seat from which your daughter Grace advocated for your release last November. We think of others from your church who remain in detention.

Ms. Abbas, your unrelenting advocacy for your sister Gulshan is inspiring.

Mr. Zhang, we appreciate your advocacy for those persecuted for their beliefs.

Mr. Wells and Mr. Hunt, I hope we can finally help bring your son and your sister, respectively, home.

We call for the release of other unjustly detained Americans, including Min Zin and Dr. Youlin Chen from my home state of Massachusetts.

Each of these individuals we speak of by name should be free. They also represent the thousands whose names we are unable to mention today. They should be free too.

Many are profiled in the Commission's Political Prisoner Database, a valuable tool maintained by the excellent staff of this Commission.

We convene with a clear and unified message to President Trump: advocate for the release of prisoners of conscience in China.

Pastor Jin is proof that this goal is achievable. We sincerely hope for more releases.

But I am worried.

President Trump has removed human rights from American foreign policy in favor of a transactional approach.

A “deal” can free a prisoner of conscience, or even a group, as we recently saw in Belarus.

But our aim should be broader. Our fundamental goal must be to ensure that people are not unjustly imprisoned *in the first place*.

This is why we cannot abandon human rights in our foreign policy. A human rights framework, grounded on universal principles and international law, is essential to convince other governments not to put people in prison for political reasons.

We will make tailored arguments to encourage President Trump to act on prisoner cases. But for the future, for the sake of prisoners of conscience in China and everywhere, we will need to restore human rights as an American policy priority.

I have always believed that if this country, the United States of America, stands for anything, we need to stand out loud and foursquare for human rights.

I thank you very much and look forward to the testimony.