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Trump Xi meeting

Another opportunity to call for Jimmy Lai's release

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The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is urging President Donald Trump to ask Xi Jinping to release Jimmy Lai and other prisoners of conscience held in Chinese prisons. The 78-year-old Catholic publisher and businessman from Hong

Kong has been in prison for close to six years, almost all of which he has spent in solitary confinement. Sentenced to 20 years under the new National Security Law, it is as if the Chinese regime had sentenced him to death. Despite his health is in a critical state, a reason for his release on compassionate grounds, the guards at Stanley Prison in Hong Kong are practising how to handle his potential death in prison. It's not a good sign.

The Chinese president's visit to the US is scheduled for 24 September. While the two heads of state will certainly discuss artificial intelligence and economic agreements, the USCIRF (a bipartisan federal government commission established by Congress) believes that raising the issue of religious freedom in China is important and useful. This was demonstrated by the events following the last meeting between Trump and Xi. 'During their meeting in Beijing earlier this year, President Trump firmly demonstrated to President Xi that the United States supports religious freedom, calling for the release of prisoners of conscience', that is, individuals imprisoned for offences relating to the denial of religious freedom, as stated by Asif Mahmood, chairman of the USCIRF.

In its 2026 Annual Report, the USCIRF recommended that the US State Department reclassify China as a Country of Particular Concern. The recommendation states: 'Due to systematic, ongoing and severe violations of religious freedom, USCIRF recommended that the US State Department reclassify China as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC).'

Calling for the release of prisoners of conscience is not a futile endeavour. China released the 'underground' Protestant pastor Ezra Jin Mingri, who was not affiliated with the recognised church, the Three-Self Church, approximately two months after President Donald Trump publicly called for his release. Jin, who was arrested by Chinese authorities on 10 October 2025, was reunited with his family in Los Angeles on 3 July, just in time for the celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of the United States.

Congress had urged Trump to use the US–China summit to advocate for Jin's release, as well as that of Jimmy Lai. The former was secured; the latter was not. Or at least not yet. However, it is important to speed up the process because Jimmy Lai cannot survive in prison under those conditions for much longer.

According to a source with direct knowledge of prison operations, cited in a new report by the Committee for the Freedom of Hong Kong (CfHK) Foundation, guards at Stanley Prison in Hong Kong have rehearsed procedures for if Jimmy Lai dies in his cell. The CfHK report documents chronic overcrowding, as well as the increasing use of

punitive solitary confinement in breach of international standards, and further evidence of potentially fatal medical negligence.

Frances Hui, author of the CfHK report, stated: 'The Chinese government continues to claim that Jimmy Lai is in good health and is receiving appropriate care. But his family is no longer receiving medical updates, independent medical assessments are being denied, and prison staff have drawn up a contingency plan in the event that he dies in custody.'

Ahead of the scheduled meeting between Trump and Xi on 24 September, the Cfhk also argues that securing diplomatic and economic concessions should be conditional upon Jimmy Lai's release.

Notably, Jimmy Lai is a British citizen, so intervention by the US President carries less weight. Securing the release of one's own citizen is one thing; championing a cause of principle is quite another. Moreover, for Beijing, Jimmy Lai is a high-profile political prisoner. Through his publications, particularly the now-closed *Apple Daily* newspaper, he was a critical voice against the communist regime at a time when people in Hong Kong could still write and speak freely.

So if Trump's diplomatic efforts have their limits, the question is what is the UK doing to try to save one of its citizens? The British government in office at the time led by Keir Starmer as Prime Minister, condemned the Hong Kong court's verdict on 15 December 2025. The government has raised the case on several occasions, both in bilateral relations with Beijing — including during Starmer's visit to China earlier this year — and through the UN Human Rights Council. This was to no avail, however. 'It's a shame that the only thing to come out of Starmer's trip to China was cooperation on Johnnie Walker, rather than on Jimmy Lai,' said Chris Patten, the last British governor of Hong Kong, referring to the reduction in whisky tariffs agreed between the two countries during Starmer's visit. As for Jimmy Lai, however, 'We were told that the Prime Minister raised the case of Jimmy Lai. What we do not know is what the Chinese said in response...”