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G7 ministers to collaborate on Jimmy Lai case after jailed publisher's plight is raised at Niagara summit

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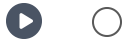
PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

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Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai, pictured in July, 2020, is facing life imprisonment under the Beijing-imposed national security law.

VINCENT YU/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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British Foreign Secretary Yvette Cooper raised the plight of jailed Hong Kong publisher Jimmy Lai at the G7 foreign ministers' summit in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., this week, with the powerful group of countries agreeing to collaborate on his case.

Ms. Cooper's intervention at a working dinner for ministers focusing on global peace and security was hailed as an important breakthrough by his lawyers.

The summit was held in an Ontario town where Mr. Lai's close family live and where he owns a string of hotels and restaurants.

The gathering was attended by foreign ministers from Canada, the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and Britain, as well as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs of the European Union.

A spokesperson for the British government said in a statement on Wednesday "that the Foreign Secretary raised Jimmy Lai's case with her G7 counterparts during last night's working dinner, and the group agreed to continue working together on next steps."

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Carney breaks silence on Jimmy Lai, says jailed Hong Kong publisher should be freed

Mr. Lai's international lawyer, Caoilfhionn Gallagher, said the discussion of his case at the summit was "an important show of solidarity by the G7 ministers at this crucial time."

Brandon Silver, a member of Mr. Lai's Canadian legal team and the director of policy and projects at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, said he hoped that following the discussion, the G7 would make the case with the

Chinese government for Mr. Lai's humanitarian release, both "collectively and directly."

"How fitting they were meeting in Niagara where his family lives, where Canada is ending its chairmanship of the G7," he said.

Mr. Silver reiterated concern that Mr. Lai, who is 78 next month and has diabetes, could die in jail in Hong Kong, where he has been held in solitary confinement for almost five years.

Mr. Lai founded the now-shuttered pro-democracy newspaper Apple Daily after the 1989 massacre of demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. It became the largest independent Chinese-language media outlet in the region.

He and six senior staff members were arrested in 2020 and charged with "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces" under the national security law imposed that year by Beijing after mass pro-democracy protests in 2019. He also faced charges under a sedition law.

The six staff members pleaded guilty to the collusion charge after being detained for between 488 and 521 days. But Mr. Lai pleaded not guilty.

Mr. Lai is facing life imprisonment under the Beijing-imposed national security law, which his lawyers argue is tantamount to a death sentence. A British citizen, he is awaiting a verdict after the conclusion of his trial in August.



Foreign Affairs Minister Anita Anand delivers closing remarks at the G7 summit in Niagara-on-the-Lake on Wednesday.

NICK IWANYSHYN/THE CANADIAN PRESS

James Fitz-Morris, spokesperson for Foreign Affairs Minister Anita Anand, said he would not comment on discussions at the Niagara summit but said “Minister Anand has raised this case repeatedly.”

“As Prime Minister Carney stated in October, Canada supports the freedom of the press and urges the release of Mr. Jimmy Lai. As host of the G7 Foreign Ministers’ Meeting in Niagara, Canada is committed to ensuring that human rights and democratic values remain central to discussions,” he added in an e-mail.

A rally of about 200 people, including Mr. Lai’s niece, Erica Lepp, paraded through Niagara-on-the-Lake on Wednesday holding placards calling for him to be freed. The protest was attended by local people including the Conservative MP for Niagara Falls–Niagara-on-the-Lake Tony Baldinelli and the Lord Mayor of Niagara-on-the-Lake Gary Zalepa.

Mr. Lai's company owns a number of hotels in the town and in the wider Niagara region, as well as bars, restaurants and spas employing more than 1,000 people.

Ms. Lepp said before Mr. Lai was jailed, he used to visit the town about once a year, and more often when his mother, who also resided there, was still alive.

She said she writes to her uncle in prison and he writes back, offering her advice about business and her children.

She described him as "the most humble man" who, despite being a billionaire and one of Niagara-on-the Lake's biggest employers, used to drive an old car and was not interested in expensive clothes.

"He reminds me to be humble in all things," she said.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer last year raised Mr. Lai's case directly with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

U.S. President Donald Trump is reported to have also appealed directly to Mr. Xi to free Mr. Lai when the two leaders met in South Korea last month.

Mark Carney broke his silence on Mr. Lai a month ago, calling for him to be released on humanitarian grounds. He also met Mr. Xi in South Korea and has accepted an invitation to go to China.

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