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# Jimmy Lai's Birthday Gift—to China

Donald Trump's visit to Beijing is an opening for the publisher's release from prison.

By [The Editorial Board](#) [Follow](#)

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Sebastien Lai, son of jailed media tycoon Jimmy Lai, holds a sign outside 10 Downing Street in London in September. JAIMI JOY/REUTERS

On Monday Jimmy Lai will spend his 78th birthday in a prison cell in Hong Kong. But this year there is reason to hope that the newspaper-owner-turned-political prisoner could be released.

President Trump, who has called for Mr. Lai's release, is set to meet his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, in Beijing in April. The U.S. and China have much to discuss—everything from rare earths and tariffs to Tokyo's public pushback on the Chinese military. But freeing Mr. Lai deserves to be on the agenda if he hasn't been released by then.

Mr. Trump can argue that Mr. Lai's imprisonment is a public-relations disaster for China, and that he is doing China a favor by helping to resolve the issue. After five

years in prison, Mr. Lai is an old man with diabetes and in declining health. If Mr. Lai dies in jail, it will be a permanent stain on China.

Hong Kong authorities are prickly about all the bad press that their handling of Mr. Lai is generating for China. We know this from the defensive statement the Hong Kong government issued Wednesday that “condemns certain media, including Agence France-Presse” for their “fact-twisting reports” about Mr. Lai’s medical care and overall incarceration.

The Hong Kong government followed up Thursday with a letter criticizing us for our editorial saying that the government is chilling speech by arresting critics of its handling of the deadly fire at the Wang Fuk Court housing complex.

In the midst of all this, two of Jimmy Lai’s children, Claire and Sebastien, appeared on “Mornings with Maria” on Fox News Wednesday. His daughter described details of his incarceration, such as the heat rash from the 100-degree temperatures in his un-air conditioned cell in the summer, dramatic weight loss, and how “his nails are turning colors, they are purplish-grey and some of them are falling off.”

U.S. officials are working on Mr. Lai’s case as part of the preparations for Mr. Trump’s visit to China. We hope Mr. Trump reminds Mr. Xi that the only way he can take Mr. Lai off the table and prevent the press from publicly asking embarrassing questions is to release him well before President Trump arrives in Beijing.

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