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Carney urged to raise imprisoned Canadians, Jimmy Lai case in meeting with Xi Jinping

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A prison van believed to be carrying Jimmy Lai arrives at the West Kowloon Magistrates' Court building in Hong Kong on Monday.

LAM YIK/REUTERS

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Human-rights groups are urging Prime Minister Mark Carney to raise the plight of Canadians imprisoned in China and Hong Kong when he meets President Xi Jinping, as well as the case of media tycoon Jimmy Lai, who has multiple ties to Canada.

They say Mr. Carney should call on Mr. Xi to release several Canadians – including Uyghur Canadian Huseyin Celil, who has not been heard from in 10 years, Amnesty International says.

Amnesty and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights have expressed deep concern about Mr. Celil, an activist who promoted the rights of China's Muslim Uyghur minority. The naturalized Canadian citizen was detained while visiting family in Uzbekistan in 2006, and sent back to China.

Canadian officials were prevented from attending his trial, where he was sentenced to death after being convicted of terrorism and “splittism.” His sentence was commuted to life in prison.

The Wallenberg centre is one of a group of human-rights organizations that wrote to Mr. Carney on Friday, urging him to raise the cases of Mr. Celil and other prisoners, including Mr. Lai, during his talks on trade.

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Spencer Li, a college admissions counsellor who lives in Vancouver, said he hoped Mr. Carney would bring up the incarceration of his father, Li Yonghui, a naturalized Canadian citizen who has been detained in China without trial for more than six years.

The businessman owned shopping malls, office buildings and a peer-to-peer lending business worth hundreds of millions of dollars when he was arrested in

December, 2019.

The multi-millionaire has been held at a detention centre in Hebei province, charged with “illegal fundraising” for failing to swiftly shut down the lending business. But he has had no court hearing or final adjudication, his son said.

Mr. Li said his father’s case “remains in procedural limbo” and the length of detention exceeds statutory limits set out in Chinese law.

“My father wants to stand trial – he believes he followed the law and simply asks for due process, a right guaranteed under China’s own laws and international norms,” he said in an e-mail.

Mr. Li, who has been in frequent contact with Global Affairs Canada about his father’s case, said that “legal certainty, not silence, strengthens bilateral trust.”

Global Affairs Canada did not respond to requests for comment.

Human-rights advocates are also hoping that Mr. Carney will follow the example of British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, who raised the case of Mr. Lai, a British citizen, at a meeting with Mr. Xi late last year.

The conviction of the Hong Kong newspaper publisher for sedition and colluding with foreign forces has drawn wide condemnation in Canada, where members of Parliament and Mr. Lai’s Canadian relatives have called for his immediate release on humanitarian grounds.

Mr. Lai, who has close family as well as extensive business interests in Ontario, now faces the prospect of life in prison in Hong Kong, after spending five years in solitary confinement. The 78-year-old media mogul, who has diabetes, was convicted at a court in Hong Kong. He is awaiting sentencing and faces a minimum of 10 years in prison.

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Both the Canadian House of Commons and Senate have passed motions calling for Mr. Lai's release. And U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters last month he had urged Mr. Xi to free Mr. Lai.

"This week there is an opportunity for Prime Minister Carney to act on the will of his Parliament and ask President Xi to release my father – which could save his life," his son Sebastien Lai said in a statement. "My father has deep ties to Canada, and I am very grateful for the long-standing support from the Canadian Parliament."

Mr. Lai's international lawyer Caoilfhionn Gallagher said Canada had shown international leadership over the past 10 years on protecting media freedom and freeing political prisoners.

She said in a text message that Mr. Carney should raise Mr. Lai's case when he meets Mr. Xi, as "silence would be at odds with Canada's core interests and values, and inconsistent with Canada's earlier statements about the case."

The Toronto Association for Democracy in China was among the groups that wrote to Mr. Carney urging him to raise the cases of Canadians and others incarcerated in China and Hong Kong.

Cheuk Kwan, the association's co-chair, said in an e-mail that doing so would show China "that we stand strong and are not about to 'sell out' on our Canadian values and international human rights norms to compromise on bilateral trade relationships."

Former Liberal justice minister Irwin Cotler, international chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre, said in an e-mail that trade and human rights "are complementary and not contradictory."

"I am not saying that these human rights concerns need to be addressed publicly, but they must be addressed, lest China infer that they're not part of Canadian and international concern, or part of our values-based approach," he said.

Ketty Nivyabandi, secretary-general of Amnesty International Canada, said Ottawa must continue to raise the case of Mr. Celil and others “in every high-level engagement with China and press the Chinese authorities to respect international human rights law.”

The Decibel

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