

Statement of Katherine Swidan from Luling Texas
Mother of Mark Swidan, A Political Prisoner in Communist China
US House of Representatives, Congressional-Executive Commission on China

“Bringing Home Americans Detained in China”
September 18, 2024

Chairperson, distinguished members of the Commission, thank you for allowing me to share some thoughts with you today. My name is Katherine Swidan from Luling, Texas, and I am the mother of Mark Swidan, an American citizen who has been unjustly detained in China for twelve long years.

Mark is not just a statistic; he is a son, a brother, and a friend whose absence has left a gaping hole in our hearts and family. We are grateful for the Congressional Resolutions passed by the House and Senate last year. I thought he would be home by now, but twelve years into this, I am concerned if I will ever see him again.

I wish I could be with you today, but my health is failing, and I need to remain strong and heal for the day Mark finally comes home. Over a decade has passed since Mark was taken from us, and every day without him is a day too long. Despite overwhelming evidence of his innocence and the arbitrary nature of his detention, Mark continues to languish in a foreign prison, deprived of his freedom, his health deteriorating, and his hope fading. I do not want my son to become another Otto Warmbier or James Foley.

I understand that diplomacy is complex and that negotiations with foreign governments can be delicate. However, the Chinese government has expressed a willingness to resolve my son's case, presenting proposals that, regrettably, have been met with reluctance or outright rejection by the Biden-Harris administration. Time is not a luxury Mark, or our family can afford. Every moment lost is a moment Mark is denied justice, a moment our family cannot regain.

Despite all the talk about human rights abroad and the U.S. taxpayer funding annual reports on human rights abuses around the world, there are no such reports about Americans like Mark unjustly detained overseas. We rightly highlight the suffering of the people of Tibet, the Uyghurs, and repressed Christians in China, but what about the rights of Americans who are wrongfully imprisoned? Who speaks for us?

Who ensures that the human rights of our citizens are not overlooked or forgotten while we champion those of others? The U.S. government must remember that its first duty is to its own people, to defend their rights and bring them home. Do you realize that every time we issue reports condemning human rights in China, that is used against Americans and others who help or love our country? I support defending human rights, but we must focus on our people first. The Chinese may get upset about your reports, but they ignore these reports, but not when they talk about abuse of our people, such as Mark. Why is that?

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While I am distraught with China for what they have done, I am even more upset with my own government. How many more presidents must take office before action is taken? President Obama, President Trump, President Biden — none have brought Mark home. Why is that? Why do the well-connected seem to have their cases resolved more quickly while families like mine are forgotten?

Mark is innocent. Even the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN WGAD) has issued a report declaring his detention arbitrary and in violation of international law. The UN WGAD found no evidence to justify the charges against him and called for his immediate release.

Despite this, Mark remains imprisoned, his rights trampled upon daily, subjected to what this Commission knows is “white torture” and his innocence disregarded. How long must we wait while the world acknowledges what we already know: that Mark should be free and back home with his family? His case is a clear injustice, yet it continues to be ignored by those with the power to act. We need our leaders with moral and political courage to do right and use our power to bring Mark home.

I am here today not only as a grieving mother but as a voice for every American family with loved ones wrongfully detained abroad. I plead for your help. I urge the Biden-Harris administration to reconsider its stance and to engage earnestly with the Chinese government's proposals. Our loved ones are not bargaining chips or political pawns; they are human beings whose rights and freedoms must be upheld and protected.

As leaders of this great nation, I implore you not to let diplomatic complexities stand in the way of human decency and justice. I am pleading for my son's life, his freedom, and the chance to bring him home. Let us show the world that the United States of America does not abandon its citizens and that we will fight for their rights and their return, no matter the challenges.

A few months ago, Bishop Strickland from Texas visited me. We talked and prayed for Mark, a devout Catholic who, even in captivity, has stood up for fellow prisoners when they were abused by Chinese guards. Mark's Bible has been confiscated, and his rosary destroyed, but, as I shared with Bishop Strickland, he has not lost his faith in God, family, or country.

I also want to thank Mel Gibson, who did a video for Mark and a Mass, and many members of Congress from Texas, such as Representative Cloud and Senator Ted Cruz, for not forgetting Mark and his plight. Of course, thank the Commission, Chairman Chris Smith, and Senator Jeff

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Merkley and the staff for helping raise awareness about Mark’s plight and that of other Americans.

In closing, I ask for your immediate action and commitment to engage in meaningful dialogue and negotiations for Mark's release. Our family is counting on you, as is Mark. Please help bring my son home.

Thank you for your time and consideration.