

Senator Jeff Merkley
CECC Opening Statement for Hearing on:
“Bringing Home Americans Detained in China”
September 18, 2024

As delivered

Thank you so much, Chairman Smith, for convening this hearing.

And much appreciation to each of you for coming to share your stories.

For more than two decades, the Members of Congress and Executive Branch officials on this Commission have sought to shine a light on the prisoners of conscience who have been unjustly jailed by Chinese authorities for seeking to exercise their basic human rights.

Our Commission maintains a Political Prisoner Database that currently has 2,764 nationals of the People’s Republic of China known or believed to be detained.

And as the Chairman pointed out, the Foley Foundation has a list of about a dozen American individuals wrongfully detained in China. But human rights organizations’ estimates go up to about 200.

We don’t know the exact number.

What we know this: even one American detained as a political prisoner in China is one is too many.

If an American breaks the law in China, that individual can be prosecuted just as a Chinese national would be here in the United States.

But here is the problem. Many laws of the PRC are not consistent with human rights standards. Due process is routinely denied. And the rule of law is undermined by political considerations.

Our United States government has been developing some tools to counter this.

In 2015, President Obama issued directives to implement an interagency response to overseas hostage taking, including creation of a Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs at the State Department.

In 2020, President Trump signed into law the Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act.

In 2022, President Biden issued an Executive Order to authorize sanctions against foreign government officials and others who are complicit in hostage-taking.

With these tools and under President Biden's leadership we have seen a 42 percent decrease in the number of detained Americans overseas since its peak in 2002, according to the Foley Foundation.

Among these was the recent high-profile return from Russia of Paul Whelan, Evan Gershkovich, Vladimir Kara-Murza, and others.

But not every American in detention overseas gets a spotlight.

Today, we are putting a spotlight on three individuals: will hear from the family members of three Americans – Kai Li, Nelson Wells, Jr., and Dawn Hunt – who have been unjustly detained in China for eight or more years.

We want to hear their story from their family members today. Because in hearing your story we're then able to tell the story. We can tell the story to the Administration and to the media. Most importantly, we can carry that message to, and work toward their release with, the government of the People's Republic of China.

Our Americans in detention suffer from illness and mental anguish. We want to make sure they get proper care and counsel.

But most of all, we want them united with their families.

We are joyful that David Lin has been released and is now reunited with his family. What a celebration that is. But we want a celebration for each of your families.

Reportedly, China wrongly holds more Americans than any other country.

We want to know why the Chinese government refuses to allow them to come home.

Our U.S. Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns has met with three Americans wrongfully detained. Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised their cases directly with President Xi.

But despite these efforts, despite the tools we have and the representations made, the Chinese government continues to turn a blind eye to the suffering and the heartbreak.

So today we not only hear your stories. Your stories represent the stories of so many American families of those detained. And they help inform the details of the circumstances and help us ponder what more we can do as Chairman Smith has suggested.

We look forward to hearing from you.

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