News



FILE - In this Aug. 10, 2006, file photo, the sign used as the backdrop for press briefings at the U.S. Department of State is seen before a news conference at the State Department in Washington. A Christian pastor from California has been freed from China after nearly 20 years behind bars and is back home in the U.S., the State Department said. Two groups say the 68-year-old David Lin was detained after he entered China in 2006, convicted of contract fraud and sentenced to life in prison. (AP/Charles Dharapak)

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A Christian pastor from California has been freed from China after nearly 20 years behind bars and is back home in the U.S., the State Department said Monday.

David Lin, 68, was detained after he entered China in 2006, later convicted of contract fraud and sentenced to life in prison, according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom and advocacy groups.

"Praise God! We got the call late last night!!! Dad is free and over Alaska now," the pastor's daughter, Alice Lin, said by text message Sunday to Bob Fu, a longtime supporter and the founder of China Aid, an U.S.-based advocacy group for persecuted activists in China. Fu shared with The Associated Press a screenshot of the text sent before the Lins reunited.

The Biden administration has been working on David Lin's case and those of other wrongly detained Americans in China for years and have raised them at every meeting with senior Chinese officials, including Secretary of State Antony Blinken's meeting this summer with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Laos. Such meetings aim to keep communication open between Washington and Beijing despite escalating tensions.

"We welcome David Lin's release from prison in the People's Republic of China. He has returned to the United States and reunited with his family for the first time in nearly 20 years," State Department spokesman Matthew Miller told reporters.

"We'll continue to push the release of other Americans," he said. "It's something that we continue to work on. It's an important step forward, and we're going to continue to push for the release of other Americans."

Lin frequently traveled to China in the 1990s to spread the gospel, according to China Aid, which says Lin sought a license from the Chinese government to carry out Christian ministry. It’s unlikely he was granted permission, and he was detained in 2006 when assisting a church not authorized by Chinese officials, the group said.

Lin was formally arrested in 2009 on suspicion of contract fraud and, after a court review, was sentenced to life in prison, China Aid said.

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The charge is frequently used against leaders of churches that operate outside state-sponsored faith groups, and it is a crime that Lin denied, according to the Dui Hua Foundation, a humanitarian group that advocates for prisoners in China. The commission on religious freedom says those leading and taking part in churches not sanctioned by the Chinese government "often face intimidation, harassment, arrest and harsh sentences."

In China, all Christian churches must pledge loyalty to the ruling Communist Party and register with the government. Any unregistered congregation is considered an underground church whose activities are illegal in China. Beijing has always cracked down on "unlawful preaching," and efforts have only intensified in the past decade.

Lin's sentence had been reduced and he had been due for release in April 2030. The commission on religious freedom noted in 2019 that there were reports Lin was in declining health and faced possible threats to his safety in prison.

The Chinese foreign ministry didn't immediately respond to requests for comment about Lin's release.

Other Americans known to remain detained in China include Kai Li, a businessman who is being held on espionage-related charges that his family says are bogus, and Mark Swidan, who was sentenced on drug charges. The State Department’s office of the special presidential envoy on hostage affairs has designated the two as "wrongful detainees," a label given to Americans jailed in foreign countries for what the U.S. government considers legally specious allegations or for improper motivations.

Nelson Wells Jr. and Dawn Michelle Hunt also are incarcerated in China over drug-related charges, and their families, along with Li's son, will be among those speaking at a congressional hearing Wednesday about Americans held in China.

Rep. Michael McCaul, the Texas Republican who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he was "extremely glad" Lin was released after 17 years behind bars and called for Li and Swidan to be freed immediately.

Lin's "capture, like so many others, marks a rising trend of hostage diplomacy by authoritarians around the world," McCaul said on the social platform X.