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As Trump and Xi meet, families of Americans detained in China hope for help

A senior U.S. official told reporters on Friday that Trump was likely to raise the cases of wrongfully detained Americans in his talks with Xi this week.

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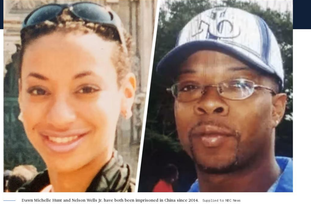

Dawn Michelle Hunt and Nelson Wells Jr. have both been imprisoned in China since 2014. Supplied to NBC News

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By Abigail Williams and Jennifer Jett

As President Donald Trump and Chinese leader Xi Jinping meet in Washington this week, families of Americans detained in China hope they will speak their loved ones' names: Youlin Chen, Min Zin, Dawn Michelle Hunt, Nelson Wells Jr.

The build-up to the summit has focused on what the leaders might discuss on high-profile subjects like artificial intelligence and Taiwan, but the families hope Trump can make a breakthrough on their cases, which often fly under the radar of the superpower rivalry.

Chen and Min Zin are both U.S. scholars that Beijing accuses of espionage, while Hunt and Wells have been imprisoned in China since being arrested in separate cases in 2014.

Their families say Wells, 53, who is from Louisiana, and Hunt, 54, who is from Chicago, were both victims of drug smuggling scams.

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, Tim Hunt said he was able to visit his sister in Chinese detention two months ago for the first time since 2024, and that she was "frail."

"Mentally as well, she has deteriorated so much," he said. "It's like taking a piece of her."

Nelson Wells Sr. said releasing Americans like his son was an easy way for Trump and Xi to show progress between their two countries and that "people like us can get some justice," adding that, like Dawn Michelle Hunt, his son was dealing with multiple health issues after 12 years in prison.

"They are both sick. They both need to come home," Tim Hunt said.

Dawn Michelle Hunt with her mother and older brother in China in 1991. Hunt Family via Reuters

According to the Foley Foundation, a nonprofit advocating for the release of American hostages and wrongful detainees held abroad, China currently unjustly holds more Americans than any other country.

Both Chen, a a Chinese-born seismologist from Boston who has been held for almost two years without trial, and Min Zin, a scholar of Myanmar politics at the University of California, Berkeley, who was detained in June, have been classified by the State Department as wrongfully detained, a determination that raises their profile and allows the U.S. government to use additional resources to secure their release.

A State Department spokesperson confirmed the U.S. has raised both cases with senior Chinese officials, calling for their immediate release, and a senior U.S. official told reporters on Friday that Trump was likely to raise the cases of wrongfully detained Americans in his talks with Xi this week.

Trump welcomes Xi at Joint Base Andrews
Sept. 25, 2025

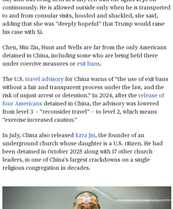
"The Trump administration has no higher priority than the safety and security of Americans, including those detained in China," the spokesperson said.

The spokesperson also said the State Department "remains unwavering in its advocacy for the health and welfare of all U.S. citizens detained in China," including Wells and Hunt, and "will continue to call for their unconditional release on humanitarian grounds."

A senior U.S. official said "resolving the wrongful detentions of U.S. citizens is always a top priority for the President."

The Chinese embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs has previously said that China is governed by the rule of law, Chen and Min Zin are suspected of violating Chinese laws and there is "no such thing as so-called wrongful detention."

Chen, 54, was detained at the Beijing airport in November 2024 as he was returning to the U.S. after visiting his parents. His family, which denies that he was spying, says they have not been allowed any direct contact with him since his arrest.



Youlin Chen and his wife, Yufang Rong, in Yoho National Park in British Columbia. Dr. Yufang Rong via Reuters

His wife, fellow scientist Yufang Rong, initially kept quiet about Chen's case but said she broke her silence due to the "lack of meaningful progress" after more than 600 days of detention.

"Youlin devoted his career to international scientific collaboration. He believed deeply that scientists working together across borders could make the world safer and better informed," she wrote in a July post on LinkedIn. "He never imagined that the research he conducted openly, transparently, and in accordance with the law could later be used against him."

Rong says Chen was probably targeted by Chinese officials seeking to learn how the U.S. uses seismic data to detect nuclear tests, a topic her husband has published research on.

She says Trump raised Chen's case in May during his Beijing summit with Xi, who promised to look into the matter, but that the Chinese government had taken no further action to release him.

Since then, Chinese authorities have also arrested Min Zin, 53, who had traveled to China for an academic workshop.

His wife, Sylvia Zin, said calls and messages to Min Zin went unanswered for hours after his scheduled arrival in the Chinese city of Kunming, and that colleagues tracked his phone and found it had gone dark about 40 miles from the airport.

Sylvia Zin, Min Zin's wife, on Capitol Hill on Sept. 16. Marian Zaludek / AP

Two days later, she said, she learned that Min Zin had been detained by Chinese authorities and was under investigation for "endangering national security."

"We were stunned," Sylvia Zin said in congressional testimony last week.

Her husband's detention "has upended our lives, leaving our 14 year old daughter, Sun, deeply anxious and unsure about our future," she said.

She said Min Zin was initially interrogated for four to six hours a day and was being held in a tiny cell with the lights kept on continuously. He is allowed outside only when he is transported to and from consular visits, hooded and shackled, she said, adding that she was "deeply hopeful" that Trump would raise his case with Xi.

Chen, Min Zin, Hunt and Wells are far from the only Americans detained in China, including some who are being held there under coercive measures or exit bans.

The U.S. travel advisory for China warns of "the use of exit bans without a fair and transparent process under the law, and the risk of unjust arrest or detention." In 2024, after the release of four Americans detained in China, the advisory was lowered from level 3 – "reconsider travel" – to level 2, which means "exercise increased caution."

In July, China also released Ezra Jin, the founder of an underground church whose daughter is a U.S. citizen. He had been detained in October 2025 along with 17 other church leaders, in one of China's largest crackdowns on a single religious congregation in decades.

Jimmy Lai in Hong Kong in 2020. Anthony Wallace / AFP - Getty Images file

Trump had raised his case with Xi in May along with that of Jimmy Lai, 78, a pro-democracy activist and former media tycoon in Hong Kong who was sentenced to 20 years in prison in February for national security offenses.

Lai, a British citizen whose family continues to press for his release, is accused by Chinese and Hong Kong authorities of being the "mastermind" behind mass anti-government protests in 2019. He pleaded not guilty to all charges.

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