

US condemns arrests, as China decries interference

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Media tycoon Jimmy Lai were among 15 prominent pro-democracy figures arrested by police in a sweeping crackdown on Saturday. Photo: Reuters

The United States has condemned the arrests of at least 15 prominent pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong in connection with massive anti-government protests last year, while the speaker of the US House of Representatives has urged President Donald Trump to invoke a law to impose sanctions on officials responsible for alleged human rights abuses in the SAR. Among those arrested on Saturday were 81-year-old activist and former lawmaker Martin Lee and democracy advocates Albert Ho, Lee Cheuk-yan and Au Nok-hin. Police also arrested media tycoon Jimmy Lai, who founded the local newspaper Apple Daily. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a statement condemned the arrests. "Beijing and its representatives in Hong Kong continue to take actions inconsistent with commitments made under the Sino-British Joint Declaration that include transparency, the rule of law, and guarantees that Hong Kong will continue to 'enjoy a high degree of autonomy,'" Pompeo said. In a tweet, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said "Even as the world confronts the coronavirus crisis, democracy and human rights continue to be attacked in Hong Kong." She

urged President Trump to swiftly begin implementing the Hong Kong Human Rights & Democracy Act – a law which requires Washington to impose sanctions on local and mainland officials who are found to be responsible for rights abuses in Hong Kong. Her House colleague, Jim McGovern, had called for the same thing, saying in a tweet that “it is unconscionable that the witch hunt has continued against #HongKong pro-democracy leaders.” Britain's Foreign Office has also criticised the arrests, saying “the right to peaceful protest is fundamental to Hong Kong’s way of life and as such is protected in both the Joint Declaration and the Basic Law.” And the Australian Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, noted that the arrests took place in the midst of a global crisis stemming from Covid-19. "Actions that undermine stability are never acceptable", she said in a statement. "But to do so during a crisis of this magnitude erodes goodwill and trust." Beijing has accused the US and other Western countries of instigating the protests and insists they're China's internal affairs. The Office of the Commissioner of the Chinese Foreign Ministry in Hong Kong said local police were enforcing the law against those suspected of organising and participating in unauthorised assemblies, and foreign countries have no right to interfere, China's official Xinhua News Agency reported. “It is completely wrong that the UK Foreign Office spokesperson has distorted the truth by painting unauthorized assemblies as ‘peaceful protests,’ in a bid to whitewash, condone and exonerate the anti-China troublemakers in Hong Kong," the statement said. (RTHK, AP) _____

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