

Plight of imprisoned Hong Kong ex-publisher Jimmy Lai evokes grief over loss of press freedoms

**HONG KONG, FEB 10:** Nearly five years after Hong Kong's pro-democracy Apple Daily shut down, its founder, Jimmy Lai, is jailed, the newspaper's former staff and readers are lamenting the loss of the city's press freedoms.

Lai, 78, was sentenced Monday under a Beijing-imposed national security law to 20 years in prison, the longest such sentence so far. His co-defendants, six other former Apple Daily journalists, received jail terms ranging between six years and nine months and 10 years.

Officials in both Hong Kong and Beijing defended the case against Lai, with the city's leader, John Lee, accusing the newspaper of inciting violence and poisoning young minds. The government insisted his case had nothing to do with press freedom, saying the defendants used journalism as a guise to commit acts that harmed Hong Kong and China.

There's no question that things are different in Hong Kong without the Apple Daily. Since it folded, the city's once freewheeling press scene has changed drastically; its voice was one of many that have been silenced in the former British colony.

"We've lost a newspaper that spoke for the people, and there's no going back," said William Wong, 66, who had been reading Apple Daily since its founding in 1995. He liked its sharp, to-the-point reporting and critical coverage of current affairs and politics.

Lai's newspaper stood at one end of the media spectrum, openly supporting democracy, while at the other end, China-backed media outlets pushed a pro-Beijing stance. The Apple Daily's position helped expand the space for other media outlets to operate, said Francis Lee, a journalism professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"When the one at the front has disappeared, the effect is that the whole spectrum and operating space will become narrow," Lee said.

After 1997, when Britain



handed control of Hong Kong to China, the semi-autonomous territory was promised 50 years of Western-style civil liberties, including freedom of the press. Some former Apple Daily journalists recalled those who were jailed as leaders who built a newsroom allowing them freedom and vast resources to report fearlessly and innovatively.

Resources provided to reporters seemed "endless," said one former Apple Daily reporter, Kwok, who agreed to speak to The Associated Press on the condition of not using his full name to avoid trouble with his current job.

Lai introduced QR codes in the newspaper before they were commonly used, he said. Helicopters were used for aerial coverage of pro-democracy marches on July 1, the anniversary of the territory's handover to China.

Reporters could report without fear, said Kwok, who was proud to work for a newspaper that he said stood with citizens.

The experimental media culture shaped Apple Daily's digital offerings. Edward Li, a former chief news editor for its online news, developed animated video reports with satirical narration that were popular with residents, though they sparked debate over objectivity.

Li said he stayed for over a decade partly because the paper, with its "trial and error" culture, let him explore new formats. Li brought the same approach to Pulse HK, an online news outlet for Hong Kong readers that he

co-founded after moving to Taiwan, a self-governed island democracy.

"If you never take that step, nothing will actually succeed," Li said. "This is something that (Lai) inspired in me."

In an industry where low salaries are the norm, both Li and Kwok were impressed by how the company rewarded employees with parent company shares.

Kwok said he sometimes felt uncomfortable when Apple Daily's coverage glorified pro-democracy figures while being extra critical of their political rivals. Sunday Magazine Access

He was unhappy when Lai launched a campaign in May 2020, encouraging readers to petition US President Donald Trump, during his first term, to "save Hong Kong."

Soon after the national security law imposed by Beijing to quell the 2019 massive pro-democracy demonstrations took effect in June 2020, police arrested Lai. They also arrested senior Apple Daily journalists, freezing USD 2.3 million of the paper's assets in 2021. That forced the paper to shut down.

Kwok said he wept after editors he had worked with had been arrested. He also considered leaving Hong Kong, but could not for family reasons.

Lai, who pleaded not guilty, was convicted in December of conspiracy to collude with foreign forces to endanger national security and conspiring with others to

publish seditious articles. The six others entered guilty pleas in 2022, admitting to the collusion-related charge accusing Lai and others of requesting foreign sanctions or blockades or engaging in other hostile activities against Hong Kong or China.

In his verdict on Lai's case, the judges wrote that Apple Daily had turned into a newspaper that opposed the city and the Chinese government after an earlier pro-democracy movement in 2014.

Seeing their former colleagues in custody has been painful. "It's like seeing your family members in prison," said Li before the sentencing.

Some former Apple Daily reporters cried after Monday's sentencing.

A 2025 survey by the Hong Kong Journalists' Association found that the city's journalists view media self-censorship as widespread. The association has raised concerns about journalists facing harassment through anonymous messages. Some in the city have grown reluctant to talk to reporters.

The gap between freedom of speech and the press in Hong Kong and mainland China, where the ruling Communist Party bans public dissent, has grown much smaller. Dozens of civil society groups were disbanded. The city's decades-old vigil remembering the 1989 crackdown on demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square has vanished: its organisers are on trial under the security law.

News reports monitoring the government have dwindled, and officials now face less pressure over accountability, said William Wong, the former Apple Daily reader.

Ordinary residents have grown more cautious, and some avoid talking about politics, he said.

Simon Ng, also a longtime Apple Daily reader, said he believes media outlets are more restrained in their coverage.

"As transparency has weakened, it's relatively more difficult to pursue the truth in news," Ng said.

Naomi Watts and Odessa A'zion join Cody Fern's upcoming film

**LOS ANGELES, FEB 10:** Actors Naomi Watts and Odessa A'zion became the latest additions to the star cast of the upcoming untitled feature film from Cody Fern.

The film, which features the previously announced cast comprising Sarah Paulson, Dianne Wiest and Toby Wallace, is currently in the production in Montreal, according to the entertainment news outlet Deadline.

Set against the backdrop of a Broadway production of Bertolt Brecht's Mother Courage, the film revolves around Paulson's character Sandra Vale, a celebrated actress whose life begins to unravel on the eve of her greatest performance.



When her sister April (Watts) arrives in New York after a 30-year estrangement, the stage is set for a tense family confrontation. Wiest plays vitriolic family

matriarch Diane, while Wallace plays April's son, Theo. A'zion will portray Lucy, a willful rebel on the edge of a life-altering decision.

It is produced by Matilda

Comers, Will Howarth, Nancy Grant and Rosalie Chicoine Perreault, with Timothy White, Tanya Lapointe, Amanda Freedman, Lucile Vainstein, Raphael Quenard and Patrick DesRosiers, serving as executive producers.

Watts had her breakthrough with her dual role as Betty Elms/Diane Selwyn in David Lynch's neo-noir mystery "Mulholland Drive" in 2001, following which she went on to feature in projects such as "The Ring" and "The Divergent Series: Insurgent".

A'zion is known for featuring in "Good Girl Jane", released in 2022 and the 2020 series "Grand Army", among others. (PTI)

Heavy snowfall in Japan leaves 46 dead, 604 injured



**TOKYO, FEB 10:** Heavy snowfall in northern and northwestern Japan has resulted in 46 deaths and 604 injuries, according to an analysis of data from the

country's Fire and Disaster Management Agency letter seen by Sputnik.

Approximately one-third of the injured (193 people) sustained serious injuries.

The highest number of fatalities was recorded in Niigata Prefecture, with 17 deaths.

The latest wave of snowfall, which has been affecting Japan since January 20,

reached Tokyo on February 8. The capital saw snow for the first time in several years, with an accumulation of 5 centimeters (2 inches). (UNI)

Pak's apex court allows lawyer of Imran Khan's party to meet him in jail

**ISLAMABAD, FEB 10:** Pakistan's Supreme Court on Tuesday allowed a lawyer of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party to meet incarcerated former prime minister Imran Khan in prison and submit a report about his "living conditions".

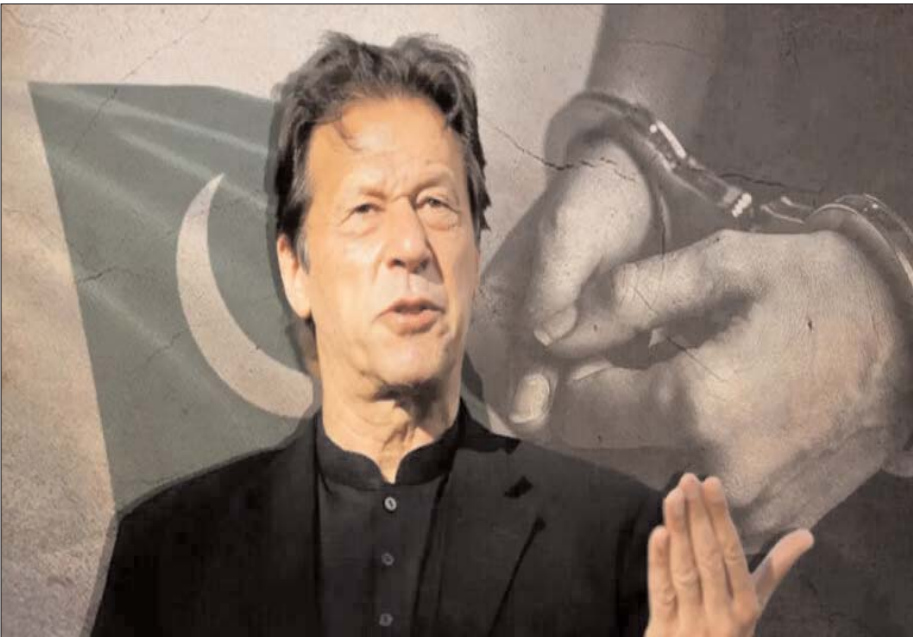
Khan, 73, has been in jail since August 5, 2023, when he was arrested at his Lahore residence after his conviction in a corruption case. Currently, he has been kept at Adiala Jail, Rawalpindi.

A two-member panel of the apex court, comprising Chief Justice Yahya Afridi and Justice Shahid Bilal Hassan, hearing a petition to meet Khan appointed PTI counsel Salman Safdar as amicus curiae with the orders to visit the jail.

The court stated that it "considered appropriate that a report regarding the present 'living conditions of the petitioner in jail' be submitted".

Subsequently, the court appointed Safdar as amicus curiae.

"Salman Safdar should go to Adiala as a friend of the court," Afridi said, adding



that the court has full faith in him. Justice Afridi said that Safdar "should be given full access to the PTI founder so he may be able to file a written response."

He also directed the jail authorities that the lawyer should not be kept waiting outside the prison.

Safdar asked the court "if the scope of the report was limited to living conditions only", while he cited reported

concerns about Khan's health after a recent medical procedure.

But the chief justice clarified and told him to "submit a report of the living conditions only."

Lawyer Latif Khosa, who had filed a petition for a meeting with Khan, asked the court to accept his request. The panel turned down the plea and adjourned the hearing till February 12.

It will be the first meeting with Khan by anyone since December 2, when his sister Uzma Khan was allowed to meet him for 20 minutes. Later, she told the media that Khan was in good health.

Authorities stopped weekly meetings between Khan and his family members and lawyers, as allegedly such meetings were being used for political purposes. (PTI)

South Korea will boost medical school admissions to tackle physician shortage

**SEOUL, FEB 10:** South Korea plans to increase medical school admissions by more than 3,340 students from 2027 to 2031 to address concerns about physician shortages in one of the fastest-ageing countries in the world, the government said on Tuesday.

The plan was announced months after officials defused a prolonged doctors' strike by backing away from a more ambitious increase pursued by Seoul's former conservative government. The discussions about a scaled-down hike had nonetheless drawn criticism from doctors' groups, which threatened renewed walk-outs ahead of Tuesday's announcement.

Kwak Soon-hun, a senior Health Ministry official, said that the president of the Korean Medical Association attended the health care policy meeting but left early to boycott the vote confirming the size of the admission increases. The doctors' group didn't immediately comment on the plan.

Health Minister Jeong Eun Kyeong said the annual medical school admissions cap will increase from the current 3,058 to 3,548 in 2027, with further hikes planned in subsequent years to reach 3,871 by 2031. This represents an average increase of 668 students per



year over the five-year period, far smaller than the 2,000-per-year hike initially proposed by the government of former President Yoon Suk Yeol, which sparked the monthslong strike by thousands of doctors.

Jeong said all of the additional students will be trained through regional physician programs, which aim to increase the number of doctors in small towns and rural areas that have been hit hardest by demographic pressures. The specific admissions quota for each medical school will be finalised in April.

"We all remember the difficulties experienced by both the public and medical workers because of conflicts over the scale of physician training," Jeong said. She

said the government will work with experts to "develop and responsibly implement a range of measures for strengthening regional, essential and public health care." The country experienced modest disruptions in services after thousands of trainee doctors walked out of hospitals in 2024 in protest of the Yoon government's plans to increase the yearly medical school admissions cap by 2,000, which aimed to add up to 10,000 doctors by 2035. Doctors' groups warned that medical schools were ill-equipped to handle such a steep increase in students and that the quality of services could suffer. Critics accused the groups of prioritising concerns over future incomes while ignoring the

country's looming physician shortages.

Faced with prolonged strikes, Yoon's government eventually slowed the planned increases in medical school admissions, allowing 1,500 additional students to enrol in 2025. But the conflict remained largely unresolved until Yoon was impeached in December 2024 over his brief declaration of martial law earlier that month, which ultimately led to his removal from power in April 2025.

The current government of liberal President Lee Jae Myung restored the annual admission cap to 3,058 for 2026, accommodating medical schools' demands and encouraging remaining trainee doctors to return. (AP)

RS MP Kartikeya Sharma urges Govt to regulate online gaming ecosystem

**NEW DELHI, FEB 10:** Rajya Sabha MP Kartikeya Sharma on Tuesday urged the government to regulate online gaming, from development to streaming, to ensure that the digital space is safe for children.

Raising the issue during Zero Hour in the House, the independent MP also demanded that the Government should grant official sports status to eSports, which is recognised globally.

"I want to address a digital frontier that is full of promise as it is of peril. I am talking about the world of electronic gaming as we march towards the vision of a Viksit Bharat in 2047. We must recognize the Orange Economy. Our creative and digital sector is no longer a peripheral industry. It is a vital pillar of our USD 1 trillion digital economy goal," Sharma said.

He said that India's creative economy is valued at about

USD 30 billion, contributing to nearly 8 per cent of our working population. "However, we must distinguish between two very different realities within the sector. On one hand, we are witnessing the crisis of unregulated amateur gaming and its impact. The sprawling nature of unregulated amateur online gaming has led to grave repercussions," Sharma said, as he referred to death of some children because of game addiction.

Clinical studies now show a direct link between excessive, unregulated gaming and the rise of ADHD, acute anxiety and depression amongst our children and youth, Sharma said. "As a parent, not merely as a member of parliament, I request the government to regulate the entire ecosystem from game development to streaming, and mandate game audits to ensure these digital spaces are safe for our children."