

WRITTEN EVIDENCE SUBMITTED BY BENEDICT ROGERS

(TRUK0020)

Transnational repression takes many forms and impacts a wide variety of individuals and groups. It usually involves actions by an authoritarian state against critics well beyond the borders of that state, and includes threats, intimidation, and violence designed to silence them. This can also include harassment or threats made to family members who remain in the country under the control of the authoritarian state, as a means of intimidating exiled critics into silence.

Although exiled diaspora communities are often the primary targets and face the most egregious forms of transnational repression, others, including British citizens, have been targeted. This includes Parliamentarians from both Houses of Parliament who have been sanctioned by China, for example, subjected to cyber attacks, email impersonation and other tactics, or lawyers, academics and activists campaigning on international human rights. Evidence presented in the Joint Committee's oral evidence session on 5 February 2025 by Caoilfhionn Gallagher, KC illustrates this powerfully.

Examples of transnational repression

As an illustration of the tactics used, this submission details my personal experiences. Noting that the Joint Committee cannot look at individual cases, these experiences are provided merely as examples of transnational repression.

In October 2017, I was denied entry to Hong Kong on the orders of Beijing, becoming one of the first Westerners to experience this. The issue was highlighted extensively in the media at the time,¹ with a statement from the Foreign Secretary at the time, and in both Houses of Parliament.²

From January 2018 (following the launch of Hong Kong Watch on 10 December 2017), until approximately 2020, I received regular anonymous, threatening letters, stamped and postmarked from Hong Kong, at my home address. The fact that the senders of these threats had clearly researched my home address (which I do not make readily available) was concerning. Furthermore, several of these letters went to some of my neighbours. One arrived addressed to "Dear Resident", which my photograph on it and the words underneath: "Watch him". In total I received approximately 20-30 such letters over the course of two years or more.

¹ BBC, "UK 'concerned' as Hong Kong denies Benedict Rogers entry", 11 October 2017 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41586529>. See also Foreign Secretary's statement: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-expresses-concern-over-uk-national-denied-entry-to-hong-kong> and The Guardian: "UK summons Chinese ambassador after British activist barred from Hong Kong," 18 October 2017 - <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/oct/18/uk-summons-chinese-ambassador-after-british-activist-barred-benedict-rogers-barred-hong-kong>

² Hong Kong Free Press, "China lodges 'stern representations with UK over activist's ban from Hong Kong,'" 20 October 2017 <https://hongkongfp.com/2017/10/20/lawyers-seek-official-explanation-human-rights-activist-barred-hong-kong/> and Hong Kong Free Press, "UK House of Lords debates Hong Kong's autonomy, rights and freedoms", 24 January 2018 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BgIacK1FX4&t=244s>

My mother, who lives in a different part of the country, then started to receive anonymous letters stamped and postmarked from Hong Kong, urging her to tell her son to “shut up”.³ My employers at the time also received similar letters, warning that my safety and well-being could not be guaranteed.

Over the course of several years, I have been subject to a campaign of email impersonation, with fake email accounts being set up in my name and used to send false messages in my name. Others, including Parliamentarians, have had the same experience.

In 2018, I was the target of angry verbal abuse by a Chinese reporter at an event on Hong Kong at the Conservative Party Conference. The reporter, who worked for CGTN, screamed abuse at me, and then physically assaulted one of our volunteers.⁴

In 2022, I was formally accused in a letter from the Hong Kong Police Force of violating Hong Kong’s draconian National Security Law, as a result of my activities in the UK and around the world. Exercising the extra-territoriality of the law, the letter warned me to cease my activities immediately or face a prison term and a heavy fine in Hong Kong.⁵

Since January 2024, I have been named multiple times, as have other British citizens including Parliamentarians, in the National Security Law trial of pro-democracy activist and entrepreneur Jimmy Lai, accused of being a collaborator with Mr Lai.⁶

The impact of all of these incidents on me personally has been minimal, because I do not have family or assets in Hong Kong and since I was denied entry to Hong Kong in 2017, I have not attempted to travel to Hong Kong. In practical terms, the main concerns I have to take seriously are a) not travelling to Hong Kong or even transiting in Hong Kong, for fear of arrest; b) not travelling to countries with extradition agreements with Hong Kong or China which might, in an extreme scenario, exercise them; c) being cautious when travelling to the region, to ensure I am not diverted accidentally to Hong Kong; d) taking necessary basic precautions for cyber-security and personal security. However, the diaspora communities face a much more serious physical threat, and the threats which their family members still in Hong Kong or China face.

³ Hong Kong Free Press, “Rights activist Benedict Rogers condemns menacing letters from Hong Kong to mother and neighbours,” 13 July 2018 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2018/07/13/rights-activist-benedict-rogers-condemns-menacing-letters-sent-hong-kong-mother-neighbours/>; New Statesman, “From Hong Kong with love: the threatening letters being delivered to UK mailboxes,” 4 September 2018 - <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2018/09/hong-kong-threatening-letters-mailboxes>; Washington Examiner, “Chinese intimidation Comes to Benedict Rogers’ Mailbox,” 23 July 2018 - <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/politics/1250927/chinese-intimidation-comes-to-benedict-rogerss-mailbox/>

⁴ The Independent, “China hails state TV reporter for ‘slapping Tory’ at party conference,” 3 October 2018 - <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/china-journalist-slapped-tory-conservative-party-conference-kong-linlin-arrest-a8566126.html>; Hong Kong Free Press, “Video: UK Conservative Party member ‘assaulted by Chinese state TV reporter’ during Hong Kong event at conference,” 1 October 2018 - <https://hongkongfp.com/2018/10/01/uk-conservative-party-member-assaulted-chinese-state-tv-reporter-hong-kong-event-conference/>

⁵ BBC, “Hong Kong: Briton accused of jeopardising China’s security,” 14 March 2022 - <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-60732949>; The Times, “Hong Kong threatens British human rights activist,” 14 March 2022 - <https://www.thetimes.com/article/hong-kong-threatens-british-human-rights-activist-3k5zvjdflk>

⁶ The Independent, “UK and US-based figures named in Jimmy Lai trial dismiss sham allegations,” 3 January 2024 - <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/china/jimmy-lai-hong-kong-foreign-nationals-b2472526.html>

Government response

In my specific case, the government provided high-level moral and political support. For example:

- When I was denied entry to Hong Kong, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement⁷;
- When I was threatened under the National Security Law, the Foreign Secretary issued a statement.⁸
- After Bill Browder, Luke de Pulford and I were named in Jimmy Lai's trial, the Minister of State at the FCDO met with us to discuss the case.⁹

When I received threatening letters, I reported them to the FCDO desk and to the police. FCDO officials showed concern and advised me to continue to report each letter.

However, in practical terms the government did little more than this. Similarly, the police kept a record of the letters but seemed unable to offer any other action.

In my own case, the lack of action is disappointing, although the high-level statements are very welcome. But my bigger concern is the government's inadequate response to transnational repression affecting diaspora communities. For example, 19 exiled Hong Kong activists now face arrest warrants and bounties of HK\$1 million issued by the Hong Kong government. Of these, at least 9 reside in the UK. Their security needs to be taken much more seriously. They should be offered security advice, a police liaison to contact in emergency, and other measures to ensure their protection. The UK should co-ordinate closely with other countries where exiled Hong Kongers with bounties reside, particularly the US, Canada and Australia.

Furthermore, in light of the serious incidents of transnational repression, the government should decline the request by the People's Republic of China for planning permission to build a new super-embassy in the old Royal Mint. The size of the proposed embassy, the largest in Europe, and the proposed location, make it likely that it will become a centre of espionage and transnational repression, threatening our freedoms, values and national security and the safety of diaspora communities in the UK.

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⁷ Foreign Secretary's statement, 11 October 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-expresses-concern-over-uk-national-denied-entry-to-hong-kong>

⁸ Foreign Secretary's statement, 14 March 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-hong-kong-watch-march-2022>

⁹ Hong Kong Watch, "MPs call for sanctions on Hong Kong officials and highlight the trial of Jimmy Lai in UK House of Commons debate," 24 January, 2024 - <https://www.hongkongwatch.org/all-posts/2024/1/23/mps-call-for-sanctions-on-hong-kong-officials-and-highlight-the-trial-of-jimmy-lai-in-uk-house-of-commons-debate>