

Human Rights Watch

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(New York) The [Hong Kong](#) police should drop their baseless criminal investigations against five prominent pro-democracy advocates, Human Rights Watch said today. The cases highlight the Hong Kong government's broadening crackdown on human rights.

On May 11 and 12, 2022, police arrested the five under article 29 of Hong Kongs draconian National Security Law for the overbroad and vague crime of colluding with foreign forces, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison. The five are a former legislator, Cyd Ho, 67; a singer-activist, Denise Ho, 45; an academic, Hui Po-Keung, 62; a senior barrister, Margaret Ng, 74; and a retired Roman Catholic bishop, Cardinal Joseph Zen, 90. None have been charged, and all have been released on bail except Cyd Ho, who was already in jail, but they are barred from leaving Hong Kong.

Hong Kong authorities havent just put Cardinal Zen, Margaret Ng, and others under arrest they have put Hong Kongs fundamental freedoms under arrest, said [Maya Wang](#), senior China researcher at Human Rights Watch. Arresting a 90-year-old cardinal for his peaceful activities has to be a shocking new low for Hong Kongs police, the latest example of the citys human rights freefall in the past two years.

On May 11, police arrested Hui at the airport as he was leaving for Europe to take up a visiting scholar position at a university. The police then arrested Denise Ho, Ng, and Cardinal Zen. Cyd Ho, already in jail, was arrested on May 12, media reported.

All five were trustees of the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which provided medical, legal, and psychological aid for protesters arrested during the 2019 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong. In 2021, Hong Kong police opened an investigation into the fund for alleged violations of the National Security Law, demanding information on the funds donors. The fund was forced to disband in October 2021.

In a May 12 [statement](#), the Hong Kong police said they have also applied to the court to prosecute the five, plus an unnamed 37-year-old man, for their failure to register the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund under the Societies Ordinance, an offense that could result in a fine. The police also said that they have reported alleged professional misconduct by the funds barristers to the Law Society of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Bar Association. The police said some media organizations have defamed the police in reporting the arrests.

Since the [Chinese](#) government imposed the National Security Law on June 30, 2020, the Hong Kong authorities have waged an [intensifying crackdown](#) on the city, erasing basic civil and political rights long protected in Hong Kong. The authorities have been arresting prominent pro-democracy leaders, shutting down independent media, labor unions, and civil society groups, and have established a hotline for informers to report suspected violations. Hong Kong and Beijing officials have decapitated the once-thriving pro-democracy movement and created a climate of fear among the general public, Human Rights Watch said.

The experiences of the five advocates arrested illustrate Beijings swift and sweeping assault on Hong Kongs civil society under the National Security Law. Denise Ho and Ng were arrested in 2021 for being on the board of the popular independent media outlet *Stand News*, since disbanded. Cyd Ho has already been [jailed](#) for four counts of unlawful assembly for attending peaceful protests. Prior to Huis arrest, in September 2021, Hong Kongs Lingnan University [declined](#) to renew his contract, and that of another activist-academic, without explanation.

The arrests have implications beyond Hong Kong, Human Rights Watch said. Cardinal Zen is a globally respected champion of human rights and democracy. He was one of the few senior members of the Roman Catholic Church to publicly [criticize](#) the unpublished 2018 agreement between the Holy See and the Chinese government. That deal allows the Chinese government not the Vatican to select bishops in China. In response to Zens arrest, the Vatican [issued](#) a statement saying they are following the situation with concern and extreme attention.

The arrests came days after Beijing appointed the former security chief, [John Lee](#), as the city's chief executive. Lee was instrumental in pushing a widely unpopular extradition bill that sparked the 2019 protests, and he also acted to shield the police from accountability for the use of excessive force against protesters.

Concerned governments should impose financial and travel sanctions on senior Hong Kong officials, including police, who are implicated in abuses, Human Rights Watch said. So far, only the [United States](#) has done so. Governments could also empanel a group of independent experts to review the role of authorities in enforcing the National Security Law and increase support for independent Hong Kong organizations inside and outside the territory.

They should also support the call by 50 United Nations human rights experts to establish a special mandate at the UN Human Rights Council to monitor and report on human rights conditions across China, including Hong Kong.

Hong Kong was long a regional leader in openness and respect for the rule of law, but now it jostles for top spots in Asia for repression and political prisoners, Wang said. Hong Kong people have been unequivocal in their demand for human rights, and governments around the globe should be unequivocal in their response to that call.

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