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The Guardian View on Human Rights in China: Liu Xiaobo is Dying, Free Him

The country's Nobel peace prize winner, now facing death, should never have been jailed. Beijing should let Liu Xiaobo and his wife go free – and the rest of the world should say so.

By The Editorial Board

China's Nobel peace laureate is no longer behind bars; but nor is he in any sense free. Liu Xiaobo's lawyer, who has been unable to speak to him directly, says police are posted inside his room as he lies in hospital, terminally ill with liver cancer. Friends have been unable to visit him there. He is at least allowed to see his wife, Liu Xia. But her contact with friends is extremely limited too. In a brief but devastating recording of a video call, shared by one of their friends, she weeps as she says her husband cannot be given surgery, radiotherapy or chemotherapy, presumably because the cancer is so advanced. It appears that the couple want to return to their home in Beijing or go abroad. The authorities call this medical parole, but an eminent scholar of Chinese law calls it "non-release 'release'" – transfer into another form of coercive control.

China, though it does not like discussing Mr Liu, has said he is being looked after by "renowned cancer experts" and has urged other countries not to interfere or "make irresponsible remarks". To Beijing, he is simply a criminal, sentenced to 11 years for inciting subversion of state power. But his crime was co-authoring and gathering support for a call for peaceful democratic reform. And his wife, who has endured years of strict house arrest, has never been accused – let alone convicted – of any crime.

The authorities made an example of the author, and the political environment has become steadily more repressive since. They also chose to make an example of those who supported him, putting Norway in the deep freeze over Mr Liu's Nobel prize. Instead of pushing back, many countries have given way, weighing trade over human rights. Some have even sought to mute others: earlier this month, impecunious Greece vetoed a European Union condemnation of

China's human rights record at the United Nations (a matter of principle, an official straight-facedly insisted). This timidity has emboldened Beijing – and Chinese lawyers, activists and dissidents and their families are paying the price.

The only threat Mr Liu poses to China is one of embarrassment. The US, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel committee and courageous individuals in China have rightly called for the couple's release. China should let them go. And the rest of the world should tell it so, for the sake of Mr Liu, his wife, and others like them.