

**Testimony of Losang Gyatso, Service Chief,
Tibetan Service, Voice of America
Congressional Executive Commission on China
Public Hearing of Thursday, July 23, 2015**

Since problems facing religion, religious institutions, and religious teachers in Tibet is widely known and well documented by this Commission and many other governmental and non-governmental organizations in the US and abroad, I won't take up too much of your time going over examples.

I would like to however touch on two events that took place this month which may serve to highlight the degree to which the Chinese Communist Party is willing to carry out actions that cause enormous suffering for Tibetans, and that create an environment of oppression in monasteries and in the personal lives of Tibetans that have triggered the self-immolation protests by over 140 Tibetans since 2009.

The latest such protest took place in the afternoon of July 9. A young monk named Sonam Topgyal set himself on fire at a public square in Kyegudo, the prefectural capital of what China today refers to as Yulshul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai province. Photos and videos showing Sonam Topgyal on the ground in flames have emerged since then, and once again as in many previous cases, Sonam Topgyal was taken from the site by Chinese security and is believed to have died in a Xining hospital.

A note he wrote one week earlier has surfaced and in it he says, "I am a twenty-seven-year-old son of Tashitsang of Nangchen, Yulshul in Tsongon region. Currently, I am a monk studying at Dzongsar Institute. As people within the country and outside are aware, the Chinese government does not look at the true and real situation of the minorities but practices only harsh and repressive policies on them. At a time when the government is carrying out policies to stamp out our religion, tradition and culture, and destroy our natural environment, there is absolutely no freedom of expression for the people, and there is no channel to appeal our situation. "

The other development this month which has been particularly difficult for Tibetans is the prison death of a widely respected Lama and political prisoner on July 12. Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's family and monastic community had not been allowed to see him since 2013, and were not allowed to see him on

the day that Chinese authorities claim he died of a heart attack, nor for several more days as they pleaded to have his body returned to them in order to conduct a funeral fitting for a high Lama. Tibetans pleading for the return of his body were beaten severely by security forces on July 13 in Nyagchu county, Sichuan. Several days after the announcement of his death, his family and some monks were allowed to see his body in the detention center where he was then incinerated in the prison crematorium. The Chinese have been in Tibet since 1951, long enough to understand that a prison cremation for a highly regarded spiritual teacher will be seen by Tibetans as a humiliating and degrading act, and therefore understand it to be an added punishment for those who had been pleading his innocence for 13 years, and then pleading for his remains after his death. Further troubling is the fact that his sister and niece went missing since July 17. A relative of Rinpoche in exile that VOA interviewed, suspected that the two women had been detained for possibly persisting in demanding a proper investigation into the cause of his sudden death.

On July 14, House members at a hearing on Tibet by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission had urged the Chinese authorities to return the body of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche to his family members, and as back as 2004, the US Senate passed a resolution by unanimous consent calling for Tulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's release. Both calls have gone unheeded.

Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's story is neither unique nor rare when you look back over the last six decades of Chinese rule of Tibet. Today, there are many known and probably many more unknown Tibetans languishing in China's prisons for simply expressing their dissent with the oppressive rules and regulations governing Tibetan lives and the institutions and figures of Tibetan Buddhism. Writers and artists are imprisoned for simply writing or singing about their love for Tibet's mountains and lakes, culture, or history. Many more are detained for refusing to denounce their religious heads, such as the Dalai Lama, during reeducation campaigns at temples and monasteries. All of the above seemingly innocuous acts can today be categorized as separatist acts according to recent regulations targeting Tibetans. And once in prison, the Tibetans are accused of acting at the instigation of the Dalai Lama, and or foreign anti-China forces, by which most Tibetans understand the Chinese to mean the United States, and are then subjected to torture and prolonged mistreatment with the sole purpose of extracting confessions that correspond to the accusations. This process, repeated across Tibet for 50 years has created immeasurable suffering for the Tibetan people, and deeply disturbed their psychological

wellbeing for decades.

As I mentioned earlier, the Chinese government's attack on religion and religious institutions and figures in Tibet is not a recent development, nor are they random aberrations in their rule of Tibet since 1951. The Chinese Communist Party has been purposefully and methodically working to dismantle the very fabric of Tibetan spirituality and religious traditions since 1955. Between 1955 and 1965, almost every single religious institution in Tibet, estimated to number over six thousand monasteries and temples, had been aerial bombed, artillery shelled, and razed to the ground. Tens of thousands of Lamas, monks and nuns were imprisoned, executed, or disrobed. Public humiliation and torturing of respected reincarnated Lamas, often to the death, took place across Tibet in the 1950s and 60s in order to ridicule religion and prove that religious figures were powerless. Attacks on religion during that period was the reason why all of the heads of the five major schools of Tibetan Buddhism went into exile in 1959 before the fall of the Tibetan government, and remain so to this day. The highest ranking Lama remaining inside Tibet was the Panchen Lama, who spent 13 years in solitary prison for speaking against what the Chinese had done in Tibet. After his sudden death in 1989, the Chinese installed their own choice of the predecessor's reincarnation, a child whose parents are Party members. The child that was selected by monks in the Panchen Lama's own monastery and approved by the Dalai Lama, was disappeared along with his entire family in May 1995 and has not been heard of since then.

In 2007, China's State Administration for Religious Affairs introduced measures that dictate which Tibetan religious figures may or may not reincarnate, and the requirement for the approval of selected reincarnated lamas by offices under the communist party. While this may appear simply surreal and bizarre to most people, there are two very serious possible consequences from these measures; one that will even further diminish human rights in Tibet, and the other that will impact the state of religious institutions and the very existence of religious practice as we know it in Tibet.

Firstly, since nearly all expressions critical of conditions in Tibet, and or, in praise of aspects of Tibetan culture and identity can be categorized as 'separatist' activities that are punishable acts today, the following sentence in the measure, "Living Buddha reincarnations should respect and protect the principles of the unification of the state," would mean that all officially sanctioned reincarnated Lamas

and the religious institutions affiliated with them would be forced into silence on issues relating to human rights, and the state of religious and cultural freedoms in Tibet.

And secondly, and this may not be fully appreciated by many people at present, the interference by the communist party in the selection or deselection of reincarnate spiritual masters undermines Tibetan Buddhism at its most fundamental level by aiming to break the trust and faith that Tibetans have invested in their Lamas for hundreds of years. Tibetan Buddhist practice, based on ancient Indian traditions, holds at its very core, the sacred relationship between religious teachers with pure and direct spiritual lineages, many that go back a thousand years, and the student practitioners who take vows, initiations, and meditation instructions from them. The successful guidance through complex psychological states and through layers of consciousness in the course of a person's spiritual practice relies completely on this connection between trusted and respected reincarnated Lamas and their followers.

The measures to control reincarnated Lamas is therefore aimed at this bedrock of Tibetan religious practice and could lead to the destruction of thousands of unbroken spiritual lineages of the Lamas, and to the eventual demise of Tibetan Buddhism as it has been practiced since the 13th century.

As an example and on a much more mundane level, it is as if a government decided that it would select people to practice medicine, surgery, and psychiatry based not on their qualifications, but on their political leaning. You can imagine what that would do to the state of health care.

These are just a few examples of how persecution of religion and religious institutions and figures in Tibet are an ongoing feature of Chinese rule of Tibet, and they are posing existential challenges for Tibetans in maintaining intellectual rigor and spiritual vitality in the monasteries and temples across Tibet. The Dalai Lama says in his autobiography that in one of his meetings with Chairman Mao in 1954, Mao turned to him, leant forward, and said that, 'religion is poison.'

That view appears to have been and continues to be the guiding principle of Chinese rule in Tibet, where its policies since 1955 have gone from destroying religion completely, to today, where a small number of monitored monasteries and controlled religious figures are allowed to exist as a show of the government's tolerance for religion, and as tourist destinations, while in reality, the monastic institutions

and the system of reincarnated Lamas is being controlled and used purely for the perpetuation of China's control of Tibet.