

April 5, 2022

Thank you Chairman McGovern, Chairman Merkley, members of the Committee and CECC staff for all of your work and commitment to support human rights and freedom in Tibet.

And thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak here today.

As a Tibetan, and someone who has been working full time on the Sino-Tibetan conflict for the past twenty three years, I can safely say: it takes a lot to shock me.

But last year, when my colleagues and I began research into reports that Tibetan children were being sent to state-run boarding schools at an alarmingly high rate, and against their parents wishes, we were stunned and alarmed by what we found.

Over the past decade - under the cover of darkness of China's near total information blackout and lockdown of Tibet - the Chinese authorities have been constructing a massive colonial boarding school system.

These schools threaten the very survival of the Tibetan people and nation because they so wholly and completely target the future of Tibet - our children.

And not just some of them, but all of them, even the youngest ones.

China's colonial boarding school system in Tibet is the cornerstone of a broader effort to wipe out the current and future resistance of the fiercely proud Tibetan people, by eliminating the three pillars of Tibetan identity - language, religion, and way of life.

In essence, the schools streamline and fast track this policy by ripping Tibetan children from their roots, by stealing the language from their tongues, and by turning them into something that they are not.

And together with "common language" and "bilingual education" policies, and other policies purposely named to sound benign when, in fact, they are not, they represent an entirely new level of attack on the Tibetan people that threatens to irreversibly alter Tibetan life in every space in Tibet - on the grasslands, in the monasteries, in the universities, in villages, in cities, and even in the privacy of one's own homes.

As one Tibetan education policy expert from Tibet who was raised during the cultural revolution told me recently:

"What is happening now is actually worse than the Cultural Revolution. At that time, they destroyed so much physically, but now they are trying to destroy the entire foundation of who we are as a people on the inside."

In our report, released in December, we find that:

- At least 800,000 - 900,000 Tibetan children in all of historical Tibet - representing nearly eighty percent of all Tibetan school children ages six -18 - are now separated from their families and living in colonial boarding schools.
- This number does not include four and five-years-olds being made to live in boarding preschools because China is actively trying to hide their existence. We believe this number is also very high.
- These children are forbidden from practicing religion and cut off from authentic Tibetan culture - beyond, of course, what the Chinese Communist Party approves of.
- And they are being taught almost entirely in Chinese, by mostly Chinese teachers, from Chinese textbooks that reflect Chinese life and history, cultures and values, while completely denying Tibet's own rich and ancient history and culture.
- On top of this, they are subjected to intense political indoctrination which says they must be loyal to the Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese nation first and above all else.
- And most Tibetan parents have no choice but to send their children away to live in these state-run schools because the authorities have closed the local village schools, along with most privately run Tibetan schools and monastery schools.
- Parents who try to resist or refuse are threatened with fines and other serious consequences. And, of course, the children also have no choice.
- One person from Tibet described the situation like this:

"I know of children aged four to five who don't want to be separated from their mothers. They are forced to go to boarding schools. In some cases, the children cry for days, sticking to their mother's laps, begging not to be sent away and even refusing to go back. Both the children and the parents are unwilling.

This insidious policy - to isolate children from their families so as to erase their Tibetan identity and replace it with a Chinese identity - was developed at the highest levels of the Chinese Communist Party.

And it is blatantly racist.

Of course Tibetan parents want their children to receive the best possible education, but they don't want to have to send them away to get it.

Nobody wants to send their children away.

Chinese people don't want to send their children away.

A backlash against school consolidation policies in China led the State Council to rule, in 2012, that all levels of school should be, in principle, non-residential, especially for young children in grades one to three.

Three years later, after Xi Jinping came to power, the same State Council issued a decree for so-called "minority areas" to "strengthen boarding school construction" and "achieve the goal that students of all ethnic minorities will study in a school, live in a school and grow up in a school."

Unlike in the past, where middle and high school students in Tibet had to attend boarding schools where we have heard first hand accounts of horrific abuse and political indoctrination, now it's primary and even preschool children who are also being targeted.

Any of you with kids, grandkids, nieces, and nephews will know that children at the age of four, five, and six, and even those seven, eight, nine, and ten are not that far off from being babies.

They are sweet and vulnerable and they need their parents and their families just to manage daily life.

My five-year-old son started kindergarten this year and I was surprised to find both of us quite nervous and emotional over this rite of passage.

But I walk him to school each day. And I pick him up each evening. Every day he gets to come home and be enveloped into the love, safety, and comfort of our family where I can protect him and look out for his best interests.

And I can teach and share with him - together with his father, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins - Tibetan language, stories, songs and dances, prayers and customs, and all of the other important cultural and religious practices and traditions of our family, our people, and our ancestors.

That this precious time of social and emotional growth - where the basic building blocks of identity are transmitted and cemented - is being denied to the vast majority of Tibetan children, and to their parents and families, is truly devastating.

And that it is being done intentionally is enraging.

In the US, Canada, Australia and other countries, policies that separated Native American, Indigenous, and Aboriginal children from their families and made them live in residential boarding schools designed to erase or change their identity is something we think of as a terrible and shameful mistake of the past.

We think of now as the time for inquiries and apologies - like the historic apology just given by the Pope to First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people for the Catholic Church's role in Canada's residential school system.

It is the time for trying to repair some of the tremendous harm that was done and that continues to reverberate. Not a time when any government would be knowingly and deliberately replicating this heinous model, and on such a massive scale.

And the reason China is doing this? The reason Xi Jinping is taking this genocidal approach in Tibet?

To eliminate dissent and difference once and for all, by transforming Tibetans into Chinese.

But this is a genocidal project that is bound to fail because even after 70 years of a vicious and violent occupation, Tibetans continue to fight for their rights and freedom.

Because generation after generation of Tibetans - even those with no memory of a Free Tibet - have shown their love and allegiance to Tibet - to the mountains, the grasslands, to our mother tongue, the teachings of the Buddha, and our great sages, spiritual teachers, and leaders, most especially His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama - and not to China.

Just last month, 25-year-old Tsewang Norbu, a famous Tibetan pop star who was just signed, in December, by Warner Brothers China, reminded us all of this undeniable fact when he self-immolated in front of the Potala Palace in Lhasa.

He had every reason to live. He was young, successful, college educated. He had a family and resources. His whole life was ahead of him.

But he gave it all up, in the ultimate sacrifice at the most meaningful and political location and moment, on the eve of the 63rd anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising in Lhasa, when security in Tibet is at its absolute tightest.

He again demonstrated that no matter China's economic, military, or political might, everything Chinese leaders have done to try to convince, co-opt, coerce, and force Tibetans to submit to Chinese rule has failed.

After looking at Tsewang Norbu's lyrics and life story, I think he took this action because he wanted to remind us all that no matter what personal success we may achieve as individuals, what matters the most is your roots. Your homeland. Your culture. Your language. The freedom to be who you are. To live as you see fit in your own land and on your own terms.

And, of course, this is not possible in Tibet today under Chinese rule.

Tibetans are being blocked from even speaking Tibetan on Chinese social media apps like Kuaishou and Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok.

And even young children trying to defend their right to study and speak in Tibetan are being severely punished.

Recently, we learned that three students, 16-year-old Palsang, 15-year-old Sermo, and 11-year-old Yangkyi, were sent from a colonial boarding school in Markham County to a detention center for expressing their sadness over the removal of Tibetan language classes from the school. They are reported to have been arrested and taken away forcefully under the pretext of needing psychological counseling. It has been five months since they were taken away, and still we know little to nothing about their condition.

I think it is hard for people to fully understand what is at stake here for Tibetans.

What this all means for our nation. Our history. Our survival.

Language rights.

Assimilationist policies.

These are words that not everyone can relate to.

They can feel quite cold or technical, perhaps even alienating to the average person who lives in a free and open society.

What I would like to do today is to explain the battle for Tibet's existence in a way that perhaps everyone can relate to better, and while this example and its parallels are not perfect, I believe it helps to illuminate what is at stake.

Imagine that Russia not only invades, but occupies Ukraine, as China has done to Tibet for the past 70 years.

Imagine the beautiful Ukrainian children we see on TV, trying to flee the war with their mothers or hiding from Russia's bombs in basements, are trapped by Russian forces.

Their parents and grandparents are killed, imprisoned, or ultimately, and only by sheer force, made to submit to their foreign rulers.

After some time, these children are taken away from their parents. Not just a few of them. 80 percent of them. Nearly all of them.

And they are made to live in boarding schools designed by Russians, taught mainly by Russians in Russian language, and with a curriculum that celebrates Russian culture and history and Moscow's military conquests in Crimea, in Georgia, Chechnya, Syria.

They are taught that Russia's invasion was for their benefit - that Ukrainians were liberated from Nazi rule.

Every day these children have to raise the Russian flag.

Every day they have to sing the Russian national anthem.

After some time, most do not even realize that Ukraine was ever an independent nation.

They do not know Zelensky's name. Or, if they do, they are taught he is an evil terrorist.

I know any good and moral person can see how wrong this would be. On every level.

It's pretty much crystal clear at this moment while we all bear witness to the horror and injustice of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine.

We would never accept it.

We would fight against it and use every tool in our toolbox to make Russia stop.

To save Ukrainian children. To reunite them with their parents.

We would know we must refuse to let Russia erase Ukraine from our world and from history.

That would be the course of action we would take.

That would be the right thing to do.

That should be the course of action we take with China.

There is so much we can do.

The world's opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown us how much power people and governments, both individually and collectively, have.

Just as Putin's actions have shown us that a totalitarian state with imperial ambitions cannot be allowed to invade, occupy, and endlessly terrorize its neighbors - because a state that so blatantly flouts international rules and norms, and indeed actively seeks to undermine them, no matter what its propaganda says are its intentions, threatens us all.

Chinese imperialism must be stopped.

Xi Jinping must be stopped.

The fate of Tibetans, Uyghurs, Southern Mongolians, Hongkongers, Taiwanese, affects us all.

I will end my remarks here and save my specific recommendations for the Q & A.

I would also like to submit our report on China's colonial boarding school system in Tibet for the record.

Thank you.