

Testimony of Ngawang Sangdrol

CECC Hearing on Religious Freedom in China

Thursday, November 18, 2004

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission regarding the state of religious freedom in Tibet. I am honored to be able to share my thoughts on behalf of the International Campaign for Tibet and on my behalf.

The Tibetan struggle is the struggle for our nation and for the right of the Tibetan people to preserve and promote our identity, religion and culture. Following the Communist Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet, our people have valiantly tried to resist the destruction of our country, our religion and our cultural heritage. Tibetan Buddhism is a fundamental and integral element of Tibetan identity and has always played a central role in Tibetan society. The Chinese Communist party sees religious belief as one of its most significant problems in Tibet, largely due to the ties between Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan identity. The Party has been confounded by its failure to draw Tibetans away from their religious beliefs, and particularly their loyalty to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. As well as posing an ideological problem for the Party, their concerns over religious belief in Tibet are also political and strategic. The Party's fear of a Tibetan desire for separation from China and instability in the PRC's border regions has increased its sensitivity to any perceived infiltration from outside 'hostile' anti-China forces.

In July of this year, the International Campaign for Tibet came out with a report on the state of religious freedom in Tibet. The report found that despite cosmetic changes there has been no improvement of the Chinese government's attitude towards Tibetan religious practitioners. I am giving below some of the findings of the ICT report.

Since the liberalization of the mid-1980s, the Chinese authorities have made various attempts to limit the growth of religion in Tibet. After the Third Work Forum on policy in Tibet was held in Beijing in 1994, religious activity began to be severely curtailed. The Third Work Forum guidelines demonstrated a deep concern on the part of the Party over the continued popularity of Tibetan Buddhism, intensified by the perceived relationship between religion and the pro-independence movement. The Third Work Forum gave approval at the highest level to increased control and surveillance of monasteries and the upgrading of security work undertaken by administrative bodies, beyond their existing duties as political educators and informants. It also called for the following steps to be taken in each religious institution:

- Vetting the political position of each Democratic Management Committee and appointing only 'patriotic' monks to those committees.
- Enforcing a ban on the construction of any religious buildings except with official permission.
- Enforcing limits on the numbers of monks or nuns allowed in each institution.
- Obliging each monk and nun to give declarations of their absolute support for the leadership of the Communist Party and integrity of the motherland.
- Requiring monks and nuns to 'politically draw a clear line of demarcation with the Dalai clique', in other words to give a formal declaration of opposition to the Dalai Lama and his policies.

The tightening of restrictions on religion in Tibetan areas in the mid-1990s reflects the general direction

of religious policy in China. At the same time, the crackdown on monasteries and nunneries can also be seen as part of the wider effort to suppress Tibetan dissent through a combination of propaganda, re-education, administrative regulation, punishment and implementation of increasingly sophisticated security measures.

In Tibet, religion became the target of destruction mainly because their religion and culture are what make Tibetans different from the Chinese. So long as the Tibetan has his unique religion and culture, there is no way to call a Tibetan "Chinese."

In regards of the Chinese general policies on religious freedom in Tibet, hundreds of my compatriots displayed their disagreement mainly in peaceful way and were imprisoned. I myself participated in demonstrations against the Chinese authorities from the young age of 13 precisely because I wanted to protest against the Chinese attempts to deny the Tibetan people our basic rights, including religious freedom. I was also incensed by the way the Chinese authorities were denigrating our spiritual and political leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and no Tibetan can accept such action. Following my detention I was given various sentences altogether extending to 12 years in the dreaded Drapchi Prison in Lhasa.

I had joined hands with several of my fellow nuns who, too, suffered detention and torture in prison. Quite a few of them have passed away as a result of the situation that they have to face under imprisonment. Those who were fortunate to escape death in prison have more or less become living corpses, even though they are supposed to have been released from prison today.

I have been fortunate in that the international community, including the United States Congress and Administration consistently raised my case with the Chinese leadership. By the grace of my leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan leadership, as well as the active support of American leaders I am today enjoying my time in freedom. While I value my freedom, I am continuously reminded of the plight of my fellow Tibetans, particularly those in prison. I would, therefore, like to take this opportunity to urge upon the United States Government to do whatever possible so that the innocent Tibetans who have been detained and tortured, solely for exercising their political rights, can gain their freedom.

In the meanwhile, I am trying to do whatever I can to highlight their situation. Upon coming to the United States, I have been told of the rules and regulations contained in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China guaranteeing several rights to people living in China, including the prisoners. It has been a surprise to me to learn that even within the restrictive system that is in place in China today, I should have been provided with rights, including the right to judicial service as well as a free trial. Not only did I and my fellow prisoners not get such rights, we were not even informed that we had such rights. Therefore, I have begun the process of trying to understand Chinese laws so that I can become a better spokesperson for the Tibetan political prisoners.

I have been informed of your Commission's report for 2004 in which you have commented on the situation in Tibet. Your report is correct in saying that even though the Chinese Constitution and other laws, like the Law on Regional Autonomy, may have clauses talking about religious and other freedoms, yet in practice there are very many restrictions placed on the Tibetan people. For example, I recently heard that Chinese officials have said that there is no formal ban on the Tibetan people possessing and displaying photos of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. These officials were reported by the media as saying that the Tibetans voluntarily do not want to display His Holiness' photos. These Chinese officials are not only ignorant of the Tibetan people's feelings but their action also indicates the Chinese government's lack of respect for Tibetan people's religious rights. It has only been an year or so since I came out of Tibet and I know that if there is no direct or indirect political pressure from the Chinese authorities, almost all Tibetans in Tibet would be displaying portraits of the Dalai Lama. We Tibetans are proud of our religious

and temporal leader, and the Tibetan people's belief and reverence for His Holiness the Dalai Lama has not waned. Unfortunately, almost all major decisions relating to the Tibetan people are not made by the Tibetan people, nor even by Tibetan officials, but by Chinese leaders in Beijing.

I support the Commission's recommendation on Tibet made in your annual report for this year in which you said, "The future of Tibetans and their religion, language, and culture depends on fair and equitable decisions about future policies that can only be achieved through dialogue. The Dalai Lama is essential to such a dialogue. The President and the Congress should continue to urge the Chinese government to engage in substantive discussions with the Dalai Lama or his representatives."

Since this Commission has been specifically established to monitor the situation in China and provide appropriate policy recommendations to the United States Government, I would urge you to consider the following.

1. The case of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is extremely urgent since there is every possibility that the Chinese government will execute him after his suspended death sentence expires in the coming month. The US Government should intervene so that this innocent Tibetan lama is saved from execution. .
2. The issue of the Panchen Lama is of utmost importance to the Tibetan people. We still do not have any solid information about the whereabouts and the well-being of the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima. The United States should press China to allow an independent monitor to verify that the Panchen Lama is fine and that he is getting his religious education.
3. The situation of Tibetan political prisoners has been of close interest to me, since I was one until recently. I would urge the United States to press the Chinese government to release all Tibetan political prisoners. Further, China should be asked to restore the rights of those Tibetan political activists who have been released. I have heard from many of these individuals that they continue to face persecution even outside of prison.
4. Ultimately the only way to provide a lasting solution to the issue of religious freedom in Tibet is by finding a solution to the political problem in Tibet. The United States should be proactive in urging the Chinese government to begin substantive talks with the representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama so that a negotiated solution can be found.

In conclusion, I thank the United States government and the people for the positive role that you have been playing in highlighting the Tibetan issue and for supporting His Holiness the Dalai Lama in finding a just solution to the Tibetan issue.

Tashi Delek and thank you.