

**Statement by Bhuchung K. Tsering,
Director of International Campaign for Tibet, Washington, D.C.,
At the Roundtable by
The Congressional-Executive Commission on China
On June 10, 2002**

Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the situation in Tibet at this roundtable. I would like to focus on some recent developments in Tibet and to speculate on what they mean in terms of China's strategy towards Tibet. My hope is that this would be of some use to the Commission and its staff as you draft your recommendations to the Congress and the Administration on responding to the changing situation in Tibet.

Since the Commission has been set up specifically to give recommendations to the United States Government to help improve human rights and support the development of the rule of law in China, I believe it should not hesitate in promoting ideas, which even require policy changes if it believes that is where the solution is.

The United States needs to adopt a holistic approach towards the Tibetan issue. Attempts to improve the human rights situation needs to be incorporated with efforts to resolve the broader political problem in Tibet.

The Chinese authorities have made a subtle change in their policy on Tibet. In addition to the policy of outright suppression of Tibetans, they have intensified their control through assimilation and incorporation of selective aspects of Tibetan life, including in the academic and economic fields.

China seems to have realized that it is not in its interest to ignore the international interest in Tibet. Therefore, the Chinese authorities have chosen to release some Tibetan prisoners who they hope will help improve their international image. They are also undertaking economic development projects in Tibetan areas, which on the face of it are aimed for the welfare of the Tibetans but have the dangerous possibility of helping to dilute the distinct linguistic, cultural and religious identity of the Tibetan people.

The Chinese authorities are using the tactic of providing access and economic incentives to governments, organizations and individuals to encourage them to be sympathetic to the Chinese perspective. China has also been attracting Western Tibet experts to visit Tibet and China, to participate in government-sponsored conferences, etc., all in an attempt to provide subtle legitimacy to their policy in Tibet. The silver lining in this development is that there are individuals and organizations, which are taking advantage of this change in Chinese attitude to undertake activities, which are of direct benefit to the Tibetan people.

Release of Prisoners

To begin with the positive news, in the first three months of this year the Chinese authorities released three internationally known Tibetan political prisoners.

On January 20, 2002 Ngawang Choephel, a Tibetan ethnomusicologist who was a Fulbright scholar, was released on medical parole after serving more than 6 years of his 18-year sentence on trumped up charges of espionage while documenting Tibetan performing arts tradition in Tibet.

Ngawang Choephel's case had received the attention of many people in the United States, particularly the Congressional delegation from Vermont.

In February 2002, Chadrel Rinpoche, the former abbot of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery and Head of the Search Committee for the reincarnation of the 10th Panchen Lama, was released from prison. Although we do not

have exact information about his current whereabouts it is believed that he is in Shigatse. Chadrel Rinpoche's prison term had been completed and his release was expected.

On March 31, 2002, Tanak Jigme Sangpo, Tibet's longest serving political prisoner, was released on medical parole in Lhasa. He had served 32 years out of his 41-year sentence. The 73-year-old Sangpo is currently staying in Lhasa with his niece. We have learned that Sangpo is not getting satisfactory medical treatment.

Clampdown on Popular Tibetan Lamas

However, the above development does not seem to indicate that Chinese policy on Tibet has changed for the better. In recent months the Chinese authorities took actions to clamp down on certain Tibetans, individuals who may not be widely known internationally but who have been making tremendous contribution towards the welfare of the Tibetan people.

In April 2002 a Tibetan religious teacher, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche (lay name: Ngawang Tashi), was arrested on suspicion of involvement in bomb explosions in Karze region of Kham in eastern Tibet (in present-day Karze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province). The real reason for his arrest may have to do with his projects among the Tibetans, which made him a popular lama.

Tenzin Delek Rinpoche supported local people in the reconstruction of various smaller monasteries and a nunnery, and he was involved in activities to provide homes and education for children from poor local families. The authorities refused him permission to build a school and an old people's home in one nomadic area. In the late 1990s, however, he successfully set up a school in Lithang for both Tibetan and Chinese children, mostly orphans, providing education to at least 130 pupils.

Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is not the first one to suffer because of his work among the Tibetan people. In July 1999, a Tibetan scholar from Amdo (Tsolho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in present-day Qinghai), Gyaye Phuntsok, was sentenced to six years in prison (and reportedly released on medical parole) for the crime of "damaging the stability of the nation." Gyaye Phuntsok had founded a school, funded partially by UNESCO, which caters for some of the region's poorest Tibetan families and focuses on the study of the Tibetan language.

In October 1999 Gen Sonam Phuntsok, a well-known scholar and Tibetan language teacher in Kham in eastern Tibet (in present-day Karze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province), was arrested in what appears to be China's concern over his influence in the area and over his apparent loyalty to the Dalai Lama. At the time of his arrest he had been teaching more than a hundred monks at Dhargye monastery for six years. Sonam Phuntsok was popular among Tibetans because he ran projects teaching Tibetan children about their religion as well as Tibetan language. He had also helped in the renovation of some monasteries in his region in the 1980s.

In September 2001, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, abbot of the monastic complex of Larung Gar in eastern Tibet, was removed from the complex against his will and is currently being held somewhere in Chengdu.

The monastic community known as Larung Gar near Serthar (in present-day Karze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province) had the largest concentration of monks and nuns anywhere on the Tibetan Plateau in recent years. In particular, the community attracted several thousand Chinese devotees.

The latest news is the sentencing of Jigme Tenzin Rinpoche (known as "Bangri" Rinpoche) and his partner Nyima Choedron for charges including espionage and endangering state security.

They had been running the popular Gyatso Children's Home in Lhasa, which had about 50 pupils between the age of 3 and 15, most of whom were orphans. The orphanage had been supported through private donations. Following their arrest the orphanage was closed down.

The Chinese authorities' action against these popular spiritual leaders in Tibet can be attributed to the fact that they have been unable to gain the respect and trust of the Tibetan people.

Use of Developmental Programs to Promote Political Objective

China has also been using developmental activities in order to promote its overall political objectives in Tibet. Its Western Region Development Program includes the railway project in Tibet.

The \$3.3 billion railway project is said to be China's biggest investment in Tibet. While the railways may have economic benefit, it will also strengthen Beijing's political grip. "The trains would allow quick deployment of troops to put down Tibetan protests like those in the late 1980s against Chinese rule and to guard the frontier with India, which fought a border war with China in 1962," according to a Western journalist who visited the construction area.

Chinese President Jiang Zemin told the New York Times a year back the railway line was being constructed for political reasons. Similarly, China has made revisions to its regional national autonomy law of 1984 to say that the priorities of the central authorities regarding the control and economic development of "autonomous" areas would be implemented in accordance with a centralized plan. According to the revised version resource extraction and major infrastructure construction are to be the main priorities for minority nationality areas and development will be carried out under the "unified plans" of the central authorities and according to "market demand".

The Chinese authorities have permitted modest development projects in Tibetan areas being implemented by some Western NGOs. In many cases, such projects seem to be benefiting the Tibetan people. The International Campaign for Tibet's position on development in Tibet is that all governments, NGOs and individuals undertaking projects in Tibetan areas should see that their projects directly benefit the Tibetan people and do not encourage the further dilution of the Tibetan identity. They should also be carried out in a manner that reflects the spirit of the priorities outlined in the Tibetan Government-in-Exile's guidelines. Dharamsala currently encourages developmental projects in the health and educational sector, particularly in rural areas. Similar guidelines were incorporated in the Tibetan Policy Act, a comprehensive legislation that is before the Congress.

Recommendations

The human rights violation in Tibet is symptomatic of a bigger political problem. Unless steps are taken to adequately address the fundamental issue, mere release of a few prisoners or the implementation of development projects in Tibetan areas will not provide any lasting solution. Given this situation, our recommendations to the Commission are the following:

1. The Commission should ask the United States government to consistently and proactively work for encouraging a negotiated settlement to the Tibetan problem between His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Chinese leadership. The Dalai Lama is calling for a genuine autonomy for Tibet. The U.S. government should formulate a Tibet policy based on all Tibetan areas, not just the Tibet Autonomous Region, in recognition of historical fact, and current demographic reality.
2. The Commission should recommend that the Congress pass the Tibetan Policy Act in light of its programmatic and political significance.

3. The Commission should ask the Administration to have a coordinated approach on Tibet, involving all relevant departments, including Labor, Commerce and State. The Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues at the Department of State should be fully relied upon, and should be involved in any aspects of US-China relations that could impact Tibet, including issues of economic consequence.
4. The US government should work multilaterally in developing a united Tibet policy, including at the UN and other regional and international forums.
5. The Administration, Commerce in particular, should not promote any U.S. corporate involvement in projects or investments, such as the railroad, in Tibetan areas that are contrary to the interests of the Tibetan peoples. The Administration should consider drawing up guidelines on this and could look to those formulated by the Congress in the Tibetan Policy Act as well as by the Tibetan Government-in-Exile for the Tibetan perspective on economic development.
6. The staff of the Commission should undertake a trip to the Tibetan refugee community in India, Nepal and Bhutan, similar to the trip that they took to Tibet. This will enable the staff to gain information on the situation of the Tibetans in exile, the working of the democratic Administration in Dharamsala, the thinking of the Tibetan leadership in exile, information all of which will be useful as you continue your dialogue with Tibetan and Chinese leaders inside Tibet.
7. We endorse the recommendations of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom contained in its third annual report released in May this year. The Commission recommended that the U.S. Congress should extend an invitation to the Dalai Lama to address a Joint Meeting of Congress; that the U.S. government should endeavor to establish an official U.S. government presence in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa; and that the United States should urge the Chinese government to provide access to religious persons imprisoned, detained or under house arrest in Tibet.

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