

“The China-Dalai Lama Dialogue: Prospects for Progress”

Statement by Sonam Wangdu

I am grateful to the Congressional-Executive Commission on China for the opportunity to appear before you. I have been involved in the Tibet issue first as an employee of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile from 1960 to 1973 and as an advocate, volunteering my time, in the free Tibet movement since then. I am currently the chair of the U.S. Tibet Committee in New York City, the oldest Tibet support group in North America.

I was born in Kham, Tibet in 1942. My mother was forced to send me away to my uncles in central Tibet, in fear for my safety because it was rumored that young Tibetans boys were being shipped off to China for indoctrination. I was a child of 8 years old when I left my home. My eldest sister accompanied me across the country. My sister returned to Kham, and the next time we met again was after 36 years in Nepal. In 1954, my uncles brought me to India where I was enrolled in English-medium schools. I never returned home nor saw my Mother again.

For 42 years, I have lived in the United States. I have raised my children here, and this country has been a host and a home to me, as well as an inspiration. I press on for independence for Tibet because I believe it can be achieved, and because that it is the only way to preserve real freedom for Tibetans.

I came to this country in 1964, and never left. I was deeply impacted by the Presidential elections taking place at that time. I watched with much excitement and even envy at the freedom that the citizens of this great country enjoyed in choosing their leaders and deciding their destinies. I read about the American Revolution, and was moved by the country’s early leaders, in particular Patrick Henry, whose call “give me Liberty or give me Death” rang so true to my ears because my own countrymen were also laying down their lives for many of the same ideals upon which this country was founded. I was equally touched by President Kennedy’s pledge in his inaugural address that the U.S. “shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty.” It was not the hawkish stance that I admired in them but the firm commitment to liberty that is so essential for us Tibetans to reclaim our country.

The official policy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile is to achieve a “genuine autonomy for all Tibetans living in the three traditional provinces of Tibet within the framework of the People’s Republic of China.” However, I believe the vast majority of Tibetans desire independence for our country because of reports from inside Tibet, and also because of the continuing arrests and imprisonment of Tibetans for even mentioning the name of the Dalai Lama.

An independent Tibet is fundamental to protecting the rights of the Tibetan people and bringing peace in the region. The Middle Way Approach is a concession to entreat dialogue with China. And to date, this policy has not led to meaningful dialogue. It has succeeded only in encouraging the PRC to demand further concessions. Those who support the Middle Way Approach do so out of the highest regard for His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Those of us who dissent also do so out of the highest regard for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, a leader who has given us a lifetime of care and service characterized by extraordinary wisdom and compassion.

I would like to clarify that a dissenting opinion of this policy does not in any way indicate an opposition to either the Dalai Lama or the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. On the contrary, I believe that these are institutions we must have — the role of the Dalai Lama for us Tibetans has been vital to our cultural survival.

It has been 57 years since China invaded Tibet; a long time in the span of a human life, but only a skipped beat in the history of a 2133 year old nation. In all these years the hope that Tibet will be free again has not

diminished. Most of those senior government officials from all segments of our society, as well as many of my friends, family members and colleagues have now passed away, but the shared hope for freedom is still very much alive.

I was a child when Tibet became an occupied nation, but the generation that followed mine has grown up never having known an independent Tibet. They are truly the children of exile and occupation, yet they are tougher, better educated and more skeptical than us older Tibetans. They are the future of the movement. Figures like Tenzin Tsundue, who was recently profiled in the New York Times Magazine, Jamyang Norbu, author, and Lhasang Tsering, or the leaders of GuChuSum, an organization of former political prisoners now in exile, the Tibetan Youth Congress, or US-based organizations such as United States Tibet Committee, the Students for a Free Tibet and the International Tibet Independence Movement, to name a few, approach the Tibet-China situation with greater media literacy, technical savvy and an unwillingness to settle for anything less than total freedom for the country of their forebears. These are Tibetans, but they are also citizens of the world, with passports that reflect a United Nations-worthy diversity.

I am a firm believer in peaceful conflict resolution; and in the case of Tibet, it is imperative that both Tibet and China be earnest and sincere in searching for an acceptable resolution. But as the situation is now, the Middle Way Approach has not brought us any closer to a resolution of the Tibet issue:

- Contact with China in the new millennium has not shown any tangible progress apart from the Chinese leaders using these meetings to wage a public relations campaign to deflect criticism.

- Although the Chinese have entertained His Holiness the Dalai Lama's envoys, 4 times in China and once in Bern, Switzerland, they have refused to recognize their official purpose or who they represent.

- Even as the Chinese host these delegations, they continue to imprison Tibetans loyal to the Dalai Lama, and combined with the lack of improvement in human rights, they have shown they have no interest in loosening their grip on Tibet.

China is using these "talks" to lower the pressure from the US and the EU who have been pushing for these talks for many years. It seems clear that the Chinese leaders are just going through the motions without showing any real interest in providing "genuine autonomy" for the people of Tibet. Yet the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, to create a "conducive environment" for the dialogues, continues to discourage her people and supporters from demonstrating against Chinese leaders during their visits overseas, and for the first time the officials of the New York-based Office of Tibet have been instructed not to participate in the March 10 demonstration this year. Concessions, be it voluntary or on demand, without reciprocity, are not inducements for serious talk. Despite these overtures and concessions by the Tibetan Government -in-Exile, China still maintains a hard line on Tibet, and the protests against China by exiled Tibetans continues. Tibetans are now even taking their fight into the heart of China where Wongpo Tethong, a Swiss Tibetan, on March 8, displayed a banner which read, "Hu, you can't stop us! 2008-Free Tibet.org" in Tiananmen Square. With all eyes on Beijing for the upcoming 2008 Olympics Games and the construction of the new railroad connecting China with Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, to promote tourism, this is the time and opportunity for the Tibetan Government -in-Exile and supporters to bring attention to Tibet's real situation.

If the US abides by Kalon Tripa/Prime Minister Samdhong Rinpoche's misperception of the progress of these talks, the danger exists that China will continue to forestall negotiations in the hopes for a post-Dalai Lama scenario where the issue will die with Him.

Rather than the issue dying away, there is a greater likelihood that the issue will destabilize, with future generations of very frustrated Tibetans resorting to other means to bring freedom to Tibet. The role and the

position of the Dalai Lama has been a great stabilizer for the Tibetan community, the Free Tibet Movement, and even the world.

The world has grown smaller, and the issue of Tibet cannot be treated as an isolated case that affects the people of Tibet only. This issue is now not simply a Tibetan issue, nor a nationalist issue, nor a human rights issue. The Tibet issue has now evolved into a global security and environmental issue.

It requires international attention to keep peace in the region. India's national security is at far greater risk now than ever before. We all saw this in the 1962 Chinese invasion of India from occupied Tibet. The dynamic hasn't changed; however, the destructive potential of a Sino-Indian conflict in modern times has the ability to go beyond the borders of these two most populous nations. Such a conflict would provide another dangerous rallying point for the world's clashing ideologies. It seems too clear that to allow Tibet to exist as an independent and neutral state is in humanity's best interest.

Tibet is located in a region of the world that is environmentally sensitive. Tibetans have for centuries learnt to live in harmony with nature. However, following the Chinese occupation of Tibet, widespread environmental destruction from massive and unplanned deforestation, farming and mining have had a profound effect on wildlife, soil erosion and global weather patterns. I am not an expert in this area but scientists have observed a direct link between natural vegetation on the Tibetan plateau and the stability of the monsoons, which is indispensable to the breadbasket of south Asia. They have also shown that the environment of the Tibetan plateau affects jet-streams which are related to the course of pacific typhoons and the el Niño phenomenon. Based on these expert opinions, preserving Tibet's environment is just not in the interest of protecting an ancient and a unique culture, but it is also in the interest of the whole human race.

In our own life time we have seen the emergence of former colonies as independent states, and the inconceivable events of the fall of the Soviet Union and of the Berlin Wall. I believe Tibetans can have their national flag fly in the capitals of many nations and at the United Nations. The goal is not easy to achieve but it is not impossible. We Tibetans must depend on our resolve, our commitment, our confidence to continue our just cause. My generation inherited a torn, ravaged and occupied Tibet, and for the sake of the future generations of Tibetans we have a duty to work hard to free Tibet.

I am grateful to the U.S. Congress for its support for Tibet. I request the United States Government to continue to urge the leaders of the People's Republic of China to publicly recognize the Tibetan delegations and to sincerely engage in meaningful dialogue with the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. I request the United States Government to continue pressuring China to improve the human rights situation in Tibet, including the right to self-determination. I request the United States Government to influence her allies to also urge the Chinese leaders to dialogue with the Tibetan delegation in their official capacity as representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. It is extremely important to keep the pressure on the Chinese leaders and to show that they are under your watch. Your voice and support are crucial to the Tibetan people.

Thank you