

Committee on Foreign Affairs hearing calls for reciprocal access, religious freedom, and human rights in Tibet

Date : December 6, 2017

Richard Gere, Chair of the International Campaign for Tibet, testified today (December 6) at a Congressional hearing on U.S. Tibet policy in Washington, DC, saying that he was “knocked out” by the support and proposals from U.S. lawmakers during the nearly two-hour long session.

At the hearing, hosted by the Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, members of the Committee and the witnesses who gave testimony called for substantive action to resolve the Tibet issue, in the context of a wide-ranging debate covering China’s place in the world, the Dalai Lama and the succession issue, the strategic importance of Tibet to the PRC, and other issues. The Subcommittee hearing came amid efforts to advance the bipartisan Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act and a Concurrent Resolution in support of Tibet’s place in American foreign policy. Tenzin Tethong, Director of the Tibetan Service of Radio Free Asia, and Carl Gershman, President of the National Endowment for Democracy, also testified.

Subcommittee Chairman Ted Yoho opened the hearing with a statement that raised both the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act (H.R.1872 in the House, S.821 in the Senate) and the Concurrent Resolution on Tibet (H.Con.Res.89 in the House, S.Con.Res.30 in the Senate). Congressman Yoho said: “Human rights and personal freedoms in Tibet are already in a poor and worsening state. According to the State Department’s 2016 human rights report, the government of China engages in the severe repression of Tibet’s unique religious, cultural, and linguistic heritage by among other means, strictly curtailing the civil rights of the Tibetan population.”

Ranking Member Brad Sherman spoke to the intensified repression in Tibet over the last decade, and the Subcommittee gave time to recognize Rep. Jim McGovern, who introduced the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act earlier this year alongside Rep. Randy Hultgren. Tibet supporters must “move beyond words to concrete actions,” he concluded.

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen stated that she has been “increasingly worried that Tibet has been pushed to the periphery of US foreign policy”, and said that Americans “must stand strong in our commitment to the people of Tibet.” Other Subcommittee members who were present or gave remarks included Representatives Scott Perry, Gerald Connolly, who first visited Tibet in the late 1980s, Tulsi Gabbard, and Alice Titus. Representative Perry raised the possibility of the US recognizing the Tibetan Government-in-Exile as a way to send a strong message to China to resolve the Tibetan issue.

In his remarks, Richard Gere informed the Committee of the recent self-immolation of a well-respected Tibetan monk named Tenga last month, and contrasted the deepening levels of repression implemented by Chinese authorities with the Tibetan “path towards coexistence, and away from conflict.” Endorsing Tibetan calls for genuine autonomy, Mr. Gere stated that China’s accountability on conforming to international law must grow as the country takes a larger role on the world stage. His remarks are provided below.

Tenzin Tethong described the difficulties Radio Free Asia encounters in reporting on Tibet, giving examples as follows: “On any given day, people in Tibet may wake up without access to the Internet and unable to make a phone call because authorities have shut down all communications. And entire families may be taken into custody under suspicion that one individual, or a close relative, has communicated with foreign media or NGOs.” Carl Gershman gave recommendations about how the American government could better spotlight Tibet in discussions with the People’s Republic of China, and warned of the threat posed by China to the world order. Mr Gershman referred to a new report by the National Endowment for Democracy of China’s rising authoritarian influence, which he defined as “sharp power” rather than “soft power” “since its goal is to pierce and penetrate targeted populations by manipulating and distorting the information that reaches them.”

The hearing took place following President Donald Trump’s visit to China during a tour of East Asian countries. Although the White House stated that the President did raise human rights issues with Chinese Communist Party Secretary Xi Jinping, he did not do so in public. It also remains unclear if the President raised the Tibet issue at all, and the recent introduction of the Concurrent Resolution on Tibet may be indicative of growing pressure on members of the Trump Administration to increase their advocacy for human rights abroad.

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: “This hearing is the latest expression of America’s ongoing bipartisan support for the Tibetan cause, and we are grateful to the members of the Committee for showing their commitment to the Tibetan people. Congress and the Administration should immediately work to implement the recommendations made here today by the witnesses. The urgency of the present situation in Tibet, in which at least 151 Tibetans have committed self-

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immolation protests against Communist Party rule, demands that we take concrete action to bring about a mutually beneficial resolution. Chinese leaders must understand that the international community will not abandon the Tibetan people, and that their human rights violations must stop.”

Richard Gere’s testimony and recommendations were as follows:



ICT Chairman Richard Gere holds a picture of Tenga, the most recent Tibetan self-immolator, during the hearing

Chairman Yoho, Ranking Member Sherman, Chairman Emeritus Ros-Lethinen,

Let me first of all thank you for inviting me to testify before the Asia Subcommittee on the topic of “US Policy towards Tibet.” This is a timely initiative as the situation inside Tibet continues to be critical and needs the full support of the US Congress.

As I look on the wall of this Committee, I can see the portrait of the late Congressman and Chairman of this Committee, Tom Lantos, a dear friend of the Tibetan people and of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who was the first Member of Congress to invite His Holiness to speak on Capitol Hill more than 30 years ago. Chairman Yoho, by convening this hearing you are honoring the legacy of a hero of our time, a kind and fearless man.

15 years ago, at the end of 2002, President Bush signed into law the Tibetan Policy Act, after it received bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate. This legislation dictates how US policy towards Tibet should be conducted by the Administration. Congress and this Sub-Committee have a very important role to play in monitoring that.

10 years ago, on October 17, 2007, the US Congress bestowed upon His Holiness the Highest Civilian Honor with the awarding of the Congressional Gold Medal; I can see in this room some of the people who worked so hard to make this happen- thank you! On that special day in the Capitol Rotunda, you were also joined by President Bush and First Lady

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Laura Bush.

Tibet is an issue that has garnered extraordinary support in the US Congress over the decades, including humanitarian aid for the Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal. The Congressional delegation led by Leader Pelosi and Congressman Sensenbrenner, which visited India and Nepal last May, confirmed once again the commitment of this institution to Tibet and saw first-hand the positive impact that development aid had for these communities.

Since the nineties, subsequent US Administrations and Presidents have supported the call of His Holiness the Dalai Lama for genuine autonomy for the Tibetan people and have called on China to respect the distinct identity of the Tibetan people; including their language, their religion and their culture, and to stop the persecution of Tibetans.

The respect for the identity of a people, of their religion, is something the American people understand very well. Before being politicians, you are human beings who understand that oppression cannot be tolerated; you understand that all human beings have the right to the pursuit of happiness. This is what His Holiness the Dalai Lama continuously reminds us; to look at what unites us as human beings, not what divides us.

This is the message that His Holiness and the Tibetans continue to send to the Chinese government. Despite the historical, cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences, and despite decades of oppression, the proposal for genuine autonomy presented by the Tibetans shows a path towards coexistence, and away from conflict.

Despite these efforts, the Chinese government ceased formal talks with the representatives of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 2010, and Tibetans inside Tibet live in very challenging times.

Just last week, on November 26, a 63-year-old Tibetan monk named Tenga self-immolated in Tibet. He was the 151st Tibetan to self-immolate in the Land of Snows since 2009. This is his picture. Even sending a picture like this abroad can, and has, cost Tibetan men and women their freedom and resulted in lengthy prison sentences.

According to our sources, the body of Tenga has not yet been returned to his family members, who have been put under police surveillance.

As we meet today, hundreds of Tibetans are imprisoned for expressing their opinions or beliefs; Buddhist monasteries across Tibet are under strict police surveillance, with police stations built inside or besides them; religious regulations give the Chinese Communist Party – not Tibetan Buddhists - the authority to identify and appoint reincarnated Tibetan Lamas, including the Dalai Lama; Tibetan nomads are being removed from their land and relocated in “socialist villages”; a number of urban centers in Tibet now have a majority ethnic Chinese population; and the use of the Tibetan language is discouraged. This threatens the Tibetan language to being reduced to a colloquial use only.

These are the policies that threaten the very survival of Tibetan identity.

Just few weeks ago, the Nineteenth Congress of the Communist Party reaffirmed President Xi’s role. As China’s role grows on the world stage, its accountability on conforming to international law and norms must also grow, and the United States has an essential role to play in making that happen.

During President Trump’s recent visit to China, the White House stated that the issue of human rights was raised with Chinese authorities. While this is good, President Trump and Secretary Tillerson did not publicly highlight the lack of respect of human rights in Tibet or the need for China to restart the dialogue process with the Dalai Lama; this is out of line with the provisions of the Tibetan Policy Act.

It is now critical that the US Congress takes concrete initiatives to make sure that the Tibetan Policy Act is fully implemented and that China understands that the US stands with the Tibetan people.

Earlier this year Congressman McGovern and Senator Rubio introduced legislation in the House and in the Senate to put pressure on China to allow US diplomats, journalists, and NGOs to have free access to Tibet based on the principle of reciprocity. US citizens face severe restrictions in their access to Tibet, while Chinese citizens, diplomats, NGOs journalists and media have free access to the United States.

Reciprocity is an important principle in diplomatic relations that should be implemented not only when it comes to trade, but also to freedom of movement and freedom of information.

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Just to give you few examples of the lack of reciprocity with China, the State Department reports that “officials of the Government of the United States submitted 39 requests for diplomatic access to the Tibet Autonomous Region between May 2011 and July 2015, but only four were granted; and when such requests are granted, diplomatic personnel are closely supervised and given few opportunities to meet local residents not approved by authorities.”

A September 2016 article in the Washington Post reported that "The Tibet Autonomous Region . . . is harder to visit as a journalist than North Korea."

Furthermore the Foreign Correspondents Club of China reports that:

(A) 2008 rules prevent foreign reporters from visiting the Tibet Autonomous Region without prior permission from the Government of such Region;
(B) such permission has only rarely been granted; and
(C) although the 2008 rules allow journalists to travel freely in other parts of China, Tibetan areas outside such Region remain “effectively off-limits to foreign reporters”.

The Department of State reports that in addition to having to obtain permission to enter the Tibet Autonomous Region, foreign tourists—

(A) must be accompanied at all times by a government-designated tour guide;
(B) are rarely granted permission to enter the region by road;
(C) are largely barred from visiting around the March anniversary of a 1959 Tibetan uprising; and
(D) are banned from visiting the area where Larung Gar, the world’s largest center for the study of Tibetan Buddhism, and the site of a large-scale campaign to expel students and demolish living quarters, is located.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to make the following recommendations, which I hope you can endorse today with the consent of the Committee:

Recommendations

- *Given the deteriorating situation in Tibet and the Chinese unwillingness to address the genuine grievances of the Tibetan people, the Congress should send a strong message by passing the bipartisan Bill, H.R. 1872 —Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2017 to promote access for American citizens, diplomats and journalists in Tibet similar to that enjoyed by Chinese citizens, diplomats and journalists in the United States;*
- *It should pass the bipartisan resolution H.Con.Res.89 - Expressing the sense of Congress with respect to United States policy toward Tibet and that the treatment of the Tibetan people should be an important factor in the conduct of United States relations with the People's Republic of China.*
- *Ask the Administration to elevate the issue of Tibet to an important factor in bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China;*
- *Ask the Administration to use economic and political leverage to pressure China to respect Tibet's distinct religion and culture and to resume negotiations with envoys of the Dalai Lama on solving the Tibet problem;*
- *Urge the Administration to work with the European Union and other countries to formulate a multilateral approach to the Tibet issue.*
- *Urge the early designation of the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues in the State Department;*
- *Ask American diplomats, including representatives of multilateral organizations, to seek access to Tibetan areas based on the spirit of principle of reciprocity by which Chinese diplomats and journalists enjoy unrestricted access in the United States.*
- *Ask for a report from the State Department on how many requests for diplomatic access to Tibet has been made to the Chinese authorities in 2017;*
- *Ask Secretary Rex Tillerson to meet the Dalai Lama to get a first-hand information on the situation of the Tibetan people;*
- *Ask the Administration to raise Tibet in appropriate international fora, including U.N. bodies;*
- *Ask the Administration to continue humanitarian assistance to Tibetan refugees to preserve and promote their distinct identity and culture;*
- *Ask the Administration to vigorously pursue the United States' long-stated goal of establishing a consulate in Lhasa.*
- *Organize a Congressional/staff delegation to Tibet to assess the situation;*
- *Organize a Congressional/staff delegation to Dharamsala to assess the situation of the Tibetan community in exile;*
- *Recommend a US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) delegation to China and Tibet to assess the state of religious freedom of the Tibetan people;*
- *Ask the Congressional Research Service (CRS) to do a report on the status of religious freedom in Tibet;*
- *Urge China to release Tibetan political prisoners, including the 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima;*

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- *Urge the new Chinese leadership to re-evaluate the 'stability maintenance' approach applied in Tibet and the dominance of the security apparatus.*

Thank you.