

Congressional Human Rights Caucus Staff Briefing
“The Human Rights Situation in China: An Update”
Submission of Charlotte Oldham-Moore, International Campaign for Tibet
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On behalf of the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), I would like to thank the members and staff of the Human Rights Caucus for inviting ICT to participate in today’s staff briefing on human rights in China.

As President Bush prepares to meet with President Hu Jintao this week, ICT urges him to raise forcefully in his private meetings and public appearances the dismal state of human rights in Tibet. Tibetans continue to be subject to often brutal repression at the hands of the Chinese government, and their unique religious, cultural and linguistic heritage is under assault.

While trade and security will no doubt be at the top of the White House's agenda this week, President Bush should strongly encourage President Hu to take concrete steps now to improve his government’s human rights practices in Tibet. Today, I want to focus my remarks on one area where there are significant abuses -- freedom of religion

President Hu and the rest of the leadership in Beijing have consistently tried to change the subject on Tibet to deflect from ongoing religious repression. Instead, they seek to shift the focus to measurable aspects of economic development like major infrastructure projects. These are part of the overall picture, and certainly offer advantages to some people. All the while, however, religious repression is intensifying within a new framework of regulations and policies of control, and freedom of expression is not possible.

China’s policies on Tibet are leading to increased resentment and despair, and are increasingly provocative. For example, a 35 ton statue of Chairman Mao is being erected

near Gonggar airport, the main entry and exit to Tibet. The Chinese government says it is the largest of its kind in China and the first in Tibet.

Tibetans are a devout people and the Buddhist religion forms a significant part of their lives and identity. Although China's constitution states that its citizens have "freedom of religious belief," the Communist Party defines what is "acceptable" religious behavior. As a result, religion is only tolerated as long as it does not interfere with or challenge the legitimacy and status of the Party.

Tibetan Buddhism continues to be integral element of Tibetan identity, and is therefore perceived as a threat to the authority of the state. From the 1950's through the Cultural Revolution, approximately 6,000 monasteries, nunneries and temples, and their contents were destroyed. Virtually all religious practice was banned, while monks and nuns were killed or put into labor camps.

Today there are some aspects of a religious revival in certain areas. But mainly, the authorities are stifling religious freedom and controlling religious practice through a complex framework of regulations and management. The monastic institutions of Tibet are the life-blood of Tibetan culture and religion. There is more despair than ever at these institutions as the authorities enforce control further.

Moreover, since the mid-1990's onwards, China's position has become increasingly hostile towards the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. The Chinese leadership views the Dalai Lama, as the main obstacle to political stability in Tibet, a "wolf in lama's clothing." The very practice of Buddhism and the display of a picture of the Dalai Lama have become, for many Tibetans, a means of expressing their Tibetan identity, and in some cases, their opposition to Chinese occupation. Therefore, issues relating to religion are seen as being highly relevant to political control and the suppression of "separatism" in Tibet. As a consequence, even the display of the Dalai Lama's picture on a website or on a temple altar can result in the arrest and detention of a Tibetan.

To strengthen its control over religious beliefs and activities, Beijing is also more aggressively asserting control over the search and identification of Tibetan reincarnate lamas.

The Chinese government's desire to control religious expression reached absurd heights last week at the World Buddhist Forum, the first major international Buddhist gathering hosted by the Chinese government. The Dalai Lama, perhaps the world's most well known Buddhist, was blacklisted -- not invited to the Forum. Instead, the forum was addressed by an uncomfortable-looking teenage boy, who was accorded the status of Panchen Lama by the Beijing party leadership for political reasons, but not recognized as a religious figure by Tibetans. The real Panchen Lama, Gendun Choekyi Nyima, was abducted by the Chinese government when he was six years old and his current whereabouts are unknown.

The teenager installed by China as Tibet's 11th Panchen Lama told the forum that Chinese society provides a favorable environment for Buddhist belief. It was shameful that Beijing scripted a boy who is not accepted by Tibetans with statements that are clearly untrue about religious freedom in China.

In addition to controlling the selection of religious leaders, China continues to conduct patriotic education campaigns in monasteries and nunneries throughout Tibetan areas. Their aim is to undermine the Dalai Lama's influence, indoctrinate monks and nuns in Party policy and ideology and identify defiant monks and nuns. Imprisonment for terms of 5-10 years or more and brutal torture continues to be a likely consequence for monks and nuns in Tibet who express dissent.

Last month, the Chinese government released into exile Phuntsog Nyidron. She traveled to the United States and is now in the care of ICT. A Tibetan nun, she is one of Tibet's most prominent political prisoners and the longest serving female political prisoner. She suffered severe beatings and torture while in Chinese captivity.

And what crime did she commit? In 1989, she was charged with "counter-revolutionary" crimes when she and several other nuns held a peaceful demonstration in celebration of the

announcement that the Dalai Lama had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize and to protest the Chinese occupation of Tibet. She was given a nine year sentence, which was extended an additional eight years after recording songs in Drapchi prison with other nuns about their devotion to Tibet and the Dalai Lama. In 1998, five Drapchi nuns died after weeks of torture.

At the time of her arrest, President Hu Jintao was Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region. He presided over the imposition of marital law, and the imprisonment and torture of thousands of Tibetans for peaceful protest. Ironically, when she arrived in the Washington, she was told that the Chinese government had apparently let her go to ensure a smooth and successful White House visit by President Hu.

While ICT joyfully welcomed the release of Phuntsog Nyidron, we believe all Tibetan political and religious prisoners imprisoned for peaceful activities should be released immediately and unconditionally. And, further arrests on such grounds should cease. To that end, we remain gravely concerned about the fate and well being of political prisoners Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, Bangri Chogtrul Rinpoche, and Nyima Choedron, and many more.

Phuntsog Nyidron's protests in 1989 were entirely peaceful, and yet she served fifteen years in prison. As she has said, the Tibetan struggle has been overwhelmingly non-violent -- despite 50 years of oppression. Today there are no Tibetan suicide-bombers. And this is because of the leadership of the Dalai Lama, who has consistently urged nonviolence to his supporters.

For the past four years, the Dalai Lama's representatives have undertaken a series of talks with their counterparts in Beijing. These Sino-Tibetan talks are very fragile. China's sincerity and commitment to achieving substantive progress through these talks is in question. And, yet there are long-term strategic advantages for China to have a dialogue with the Dalai Lama and a resolution on Tibet.

In addition, China's rapid economic development policy is failing in Tibet -- new research shows that Tibetans are suffering from among the highest poverty rates in China, among the highest rural-urban inequality and the worst education indicators. The economy is propped up by subsidies and is unsustainable in the long term. The result is a potentially more volatile Tibet with even greater unrest. This increases the need for a lasting solution in partnership with the Dalai Lama, the only person to command the loyalty of Tibetans in Tibet and in exile.

Every opportunity must be taken at the highest levels to address the hostility of the atheist Chinese government to the Dalai Lama. This must move beyond the section of the Party that deals with religion and external affairs to the senior echelons - and to Hu Jintao himself. As the top leader of Tibet in the late 1980s, Hu Jintao presided over the imposition of martial law - a violent crackdown on dissent, and his hard-line policies form the basis for China's approach to Tibet today.

Therefore we urge President Bush to convey to President Hu Jintao, that as a modern leader of today's China, he has a powerful interest in ensuring that his legacy on Tibet is not solely that of presiding over a violent crackdown.

For More Information, Contact:

Charlotte Oldham-Moore
Director of Government Relations
International Campaign for Tibet
1825 Jefferson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: (202) 785-1515 ext. 35