

International Campaign for Tibet
Statement for the Record
Joint Hearing of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and
International Operations and Asia and the Pacific on
“The Internet in China: A Tool for Freedom or Suppression?”
February 15, 2006

The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) is deeply concerned about U.S. technology companies assisting the Chinese government in censoring the internet and in identifying and punishing those who express views contrary to the government's. For almost twenty years, ICT has worked to promote human rights and democratic freedoms for the people of 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.

An uncensored internet has enormous potential to be a liberating force and can be a vital tool for advancing human rights in Tibet. But, unfortunately, this is now not the case. Since China censors freedom of expression on the internet, and U.S. technology companies, in pursuit of new and lucrative markets, provide technology to China which is used to restrict basic freedoms; the internet is instead a tool of repression.

China's economic reforms have not led to political reforms or to fundamental improvements in its policy of controlling the flow of information. During the debates on granting China Permanent Normal Trade Relations in the 1990's, supporters argued that expanded trade with China would inexorably lead to greater human rights and democracy in China and Tibet. Regrettably, this dream has not come to pass. Instead, the Chinese government has been able to check-mate greater access to cell phones, faxes and the internet by ordinary Chinese and Tibetans by using advanced technology to censor

telephone and internet communications, track cyber-dissidents and disseminate propaganda. The result is a virtual Iron Curtain.

Even before Google launched its new search platform in China and Tibet, internet users there had to contend with the government's 30,000 internet police and its "great firewall," which sanitizes web search results, and blocks thousands of websites, including ICT's and other human rights organizations.

At the same time, U.S. internet companies like Microsoft, Cisco Systems, and Yahoo! have assisted China in making its repressive practices even more effective. For example, Microsoft closed a popular blog it hosted that offended Chinese censors. Cisco has sold equipment that helps Beijing restrict access to websites it considers subversive. And, in 2005 Yahoo! apparently provided information to Chinese authorities to identify Shi Tao, a Chinese journalist, who was accused of leaking "state secrets abroad." What did Shi Tao leak? Tao simply emailed portions of a directive issued by China's Propaganda Department that instructed the Chinese media as to how to cover the 15th anniversary of the military crackdown in the Tiananmen Square. And for that 'crime,' Shi Tao was sentenced last April to a ten-year prison term.

Last month, Google launched Google.cn, a new search platform in China and Tibet that censors and distorts information on topics sensitive to Beijing. Google.cn filters search results according to criteria set by the Chinese government. These topics include "Tibet," "human rights," "democracy," "Dalai Lama," and countless others. If a Tibetan or Chinese user of Google.cn, for example, wants to see an image of the 14th Dalai Lama, he will find a variety of images, but none of the exiled Dalai Lama himself. Instead, the internet user will be given images of Chinese-run Tibet, Chinese officials talking about Tibet, and even a photo of a man protesting the visit of the Dalai Lama to England. Only one of the 161 images produced by searching in Chinese for the Dalai Lama on Google.cn shows the 14th Dalai Lama, according to a February 12th report by the New York Times, and this archival photo was taken before his exile in 1959. In contrast, for

people outside of China, the 2,030 unfiltered images provided on Google.com center on the 14th Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet since 1940.

While the Chinese government uses advanced technology acquired from US companies to censor internet communications and track cyber dissidents, China also uses the internet as a proactive propaganda vehicle. Chinese authorities have set up many Tibet information websites, such as www.tibetinfo.com.cn and www.tibetology.com.cn, which seek to legitimize its repressive control of the region. Never mentioning crackdowns, patriotic campaigns, and extensive human rights abuses, the English-language versions of these sites highlight living conditions in Tibet and the Chinese government's portrayal of respect for basic freedoms. These sites aim both to mould Chinese public opinion favorably towards Beijing's policies in Tibet and to mollify foreign criticism towards China's brutal record in Tibet.

For the people of Tibet, China's censorship of the internet is just one part of an overall strategy to repress their freedom of expression, and to exert control over independent information from Tibet reaching the world and "subversive" information from the outside world reaching Tibet. While the Chinese government asserts that Tibetans enjoy freedoms of speech and assembly, Tibetans in practice are not allowed, for example, to express the opinion that Tibet had ever been independent and that China's annexation of Tibet has ever been anything other than a "peaceful liberation." Tibetans continue to be arrested and imprisoned – with or without trial – and sentenced for the peaceful expression of their political views

China's continuing crackdown on the right to information in Tibet, whether via the internet or by other means, is targeted above all on those who try to publish, distribute or read the Dalai Lama's writings. A 24 year-old-monk named Phuntsok Tsering, by example, was arrested in 2001 for having a book by the Dalai Lama in his possession. He is still detained. Tashi Gyaltzen, Lobsang Dhargay, Thoe Samden, Tsultrim Phelgay and Jampel Gyatso of Drakar Trezong monastery were arrested on January 16, 2005 and are now in a labor camp in Qinghai. They are serving sentences of two to three years in

labor camps for publishing a newspaper containing poems and articles of a political nature.

Although China's constitution states that its citizens have "freedom of religious belief," China aggressively censors websites and blogs on Tibetan Buddhism that do not meet the Communist Party's definition of 'acceptable' religious belief. The measures used to implement state religious policy have been particularly harsh in Tibet because of the close link between religion and Tibetan identity. Tibetan Buddhism continues to be integral element of Tibetan identity, and is therefore perceived as a threat to the authority of the state. And, the Chinese leadership views the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, as the main obstacle to political stability in Tibet, a "wolf in lama's clothing." 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. 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.

Changing the Chinese government's policies is, of course, challenging. But, the US government can take several concrete steps to make it more difficult for China to succeed in its censorship efforts. First, the US should aggressively encourage a concerted, collective effort by American internet companies to stand up to Chinese pressure. If the companies refuse to do the right thing and take immediate action to ensure that their operations do not facilitate human rights abuses, then the pressure they are facing from the Chinese government should be matched by pressure from their own government, that of the United States.

No American company should ever, under any circumstances, turn over the name of a political dissident to an autocratic state with a horrific record of human rights abuses. Further, no American company whose business is the free flow of information should censor information to satisfy the political demands of a dictatorship. Congress must ensure that these fundamental moral lines are not crossed. And, therefore, it should pass legislation similar to the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act to bar US companies from

disclosing the identities of dissidents or other individuals to foreign governments, when the information is sought to punish or control political speech, which is protected by international law. Turning over dissidents to ruthless dictatorships should clearly be prohibited by US law. American laws must support American values of freedom and advancing democracy.

Congress should also consider whether companies in violation of these fundamental principles should be banned from taxpayer financing for their foreign operations from the EximBank and OPIC, and more generally from federal procurement.

President Bush should publicly raise the crackdown on internet users in China and Tibet during his meeting with the Chinese President Hu's State Visit to the United States in April. And, Secretary Rice should make public any assistance the United States Embassy in China offered American internet companies in promoting their business in China, and whether the Embassy raised the issue of complicity in censorship with these companies.

The International Campaign for Tibet hopes that American internet companies will not put profit above principle and willfully ignore international human rights standards. But if these companies do not reverse course, Congress and the Administration must step forward to ensure that some principles are not negotiable.