

# Tibetan pilgrims compelled to return from Dalai Lama teaching in Bodh Gaya, India; China calls the teaching 'illegal'

Date : January 9, 2017

ICT is at the Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya and will provide further updates this week



His Holiness the Dalai Lama looks on as Thamthog Rinpoche places ritual implements around the completed Kalachakra sand mandala during preparations for the Kalachakra Empowerment in Bodhgaya, Bihar, India on January 8, 2017. (Photo: Tenzin Choejor, OHHDL)

Thousands of Tibetan pilgrims have been compelled by the Chinese authorities to return to Tibet after travelling to India to attend a major teaching by the Dalai Lama that is underway in Bodh Gaya, a sacred Buddhist site, India, this week. This follows systematic measures in Tibet to prevent them travelling out of the country at all, even though many had spent years obtaining passports for legal travel.

The Chinese state media denied reports that Tibetans had been compelled to return but said that the government certainly "does not encourage" them to attend, because "the India-based ceremony frequently degenerates into a political tool," according to the Global Times on January 5.<sup>[1]</sup> Other reports state that the Kalachakra, a major religious empowerment attended by more than 100,000 people from across the world in the town where the Buddha was enlightened, has been characterized by the Chinese authorities as 'illegal'.<sup>[2]</sup>

# International Campaign for Tibet

It is the most systematic crackdown so far linked to a Dalai Lama's teaching in exile, following a trend of increasingly hardline steps targeting continued devotion to him within Tibet, while the Chinese authorities are unable to undermine his high global profile. In 2012, the Chinese authorities launched a major operation to detain Tibetans attending the last Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya, 'disappearing' many pilgrims for weeks or months on their return, and holding them for long periods for 're-education' in military camps and other facilities. In July 2014, when the Dalai Lama conferred another Kalachakra initiation in Ladakh, India, for the first time the religious teachings were described by the Chinese state as an incitement to 'hatred' and 'extremist action'.

Kalon Karma Gelek Yuthok, Chairman of the Kalachakra Organising Committee, said that the number compelled to return totaled nearly 7,000. A Tibetan in Bodh Gaya told ICT: "The Chinese authorities are using methods that show they really know how to hurt people and force them to go home. Monks have been told that if they do not return home, they will have to leave their monasteries. With others, when warnings that they will lose their pension or job do not work, they threaten their families. Even if they do not care what happens to them, because being at the Kalachakra in the presence of His Holiness is so important, they obviously cannot accept that."

One Tibetan woman was told she should return otherwise her government pension would be withdrawn. When she failed to take heed of the warning because attending the Kalachakra was a lifelong dream, she was told that her children would lose their jobs. A monk from Machu was told that if he did not go home he would not be able to return to his monastery; one of his relatives had to sign a paper to say that he was coming back. This has been the case with many pilgrims – family members have been required to sign papers stating that they will return, and the implication is that those relatives will face serious consequences if they do not.



A partial view of the devotees gathered at the Dalai Lama's teachings in Bodhgaya, Bihar, India on January 8, 2017. (Photo: Lobsang Tsering, OHHDL)

A group of Tibetans travelling to the Kalachakra from Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) was followed by local police to Chengdu; in order to avoid being apprehended and prevented from travelling, they had to move hotels several times and a monk relative of theirs was arrested. When some of the group finally reached Kathmandu in Nepal, for onward travel to India, one of the Tibetans had a breakdown and collapsed from the strain of seeking to attend.

Several hundred Tibetans who had reached Dharamsala before attending the Kalachakra were able to receive audiences with the Dalai Lama before they left, but many others were unable to do so. Another Tibetan at the Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya told ICT: "In the days before the Kalachakra ceremony began, it was unbearable to witness the distress of Tibetans who were receiving calls from their families in Tibet to tell them about the threats. Tibetan pilgrims were sobbing and holding onto each other, so heartbroken to have to leave before His Holiness even arrived."

Even Chinese people attending the Kalachakra have faced pressure. Two Chinese devotees currently in Bodh Gaya said that they have received calls warning them to return home or their passports will be confiscated.

"The Chinese government continues to systematically prevent the Tibetan people from attending religious teachings by the Dalai Lama, and threatens them with punishments if they do so. This shows once again the disregard for religious freedom by Beijing, whose oppressive policies are only increasing tensions in Tibet. We call on all governments who respect religious freedom, to closely monitor the situation inside Tibet, – where more people could be punished after the Kalachakra - urge China to stop this

# International Campaign for Tibet

---

nonsensical decades long oppression, and embrace the message of tolerance and compassion of the Dalai Lama” said Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet.

This is the first Kalachakra in exile for which the Central Tibetan Administration is one of the main sponsors. At a press conference in Bodh Gaya on January 8, 2017, Sikyong Lobsang Sangay told journalists: “Getting passports is legal, getting visas is also legal, going to Buddhist sites [such as Bodh Gaya] is legal, so for the Chinese authorities to threaten them to return under such severe pressure is simply unacceptable.” The Sikyong said that the Kalachakra at Bodh Gaya this year was special not only for spiritual reasons, but also “because of the pressure put on people coming to Bodh Gaya. So Tibetans who have had to go home [even so] are silently and quietly participating in the religious rituals. As His Holiness has said from the ground of Bodh Gaya, they will receive the Kalachakra inside Tibet as well. [And] it is not only a spiritual transmission from Bodh Gaya to Tibet, but it is transmitted across the world.”

The Chinese authorities had tightened controls on Tibetans, in some areas going from house to house to confiscate people’s passports, in October and November last year.

It is already extremely difficult for Tibetans to obtain passports, with very few Tibetans in the Tibet Autonomous Region and other areas being issued passports and others having theirs recalled – in contrast, more and more Chinese are travelling both abroad and freely in Tibet – but the restrictions imposed late last year were linked to preventing Tibetans from attending the Kalachakra in Bodh Gaya. In Qinghai, according to the same sources, the government requires applicants for a Chinese passport to provide guarantees that they would not travel to India, where the Dalai Lama resides.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Footnotes:

[1] <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1027367.shtml>

[2] According to Radio Free Asia, official notices circulating in the Tibetan prefecture of Dechen (Chinese: Deqin) in Yunnan threatened jail terms of from 10 days to five years for involvement in the event, either attending, or circulating images on social media. (January 5, RFA, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/illegal-01052017151431.html>).

[3] ICT report, November 17, 2016, <https://www.savetibet.org/ict-inside-tibet-news-and-analysis-of-emerging-developments-in-tibet-2/>