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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“Human Rights in Tibet”

340 Cannon HOB – Wednesday, June 5, 2013 – 2:00-3:30 pm

Good morning. Thank you for attending this very important hearing on the current human rights situation in Tibet. I want to thank Congressman Wolf for chairing today’s event, and for his long-standing commitment to promotion of human rights in Tibet. I would also like to give my special thanks to the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for their help in preparing this hearing.

I know there are many people in the audience today who understand the uneven struggle for human rights against a powerful system first-hand. Here with us today are families of the Chinese dissidents, currently imprisoned for daring to disagree with the mainstream ideology of their government; and we welcome their presence. I was also delighted to learn that eleven young and driven Tibetan-American college students are in the audience this afternoon – it is great to see that the young generation, even if far from their historical home, is eager to continue working for their people and for preservation of their culture and identity.

In 1987, the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, which was the predecessor to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, was the first U.S. Government body to extend a formal invitation to the Dalai Lama to address the issue of repression in Tibet. Since then, the Caucus and the Commission went on to hold many more events on the subject of human rights in Tibet, and we are pleased to continue that tradition.

However, despite the overwhelming support from the United Nations and international community for human rights protections for Tibetans, I regret to say that the Chinese government continues to deny these rights to them. For more than 60 years, Tibetans have faced constant religious, political, and cultural repression of varying degrees of intensity. For decades, the Chinese government has gone to great lengths to mitigate the influence of the Dalai Lama and to eradicate the Tibetan culture and identity, by passing laws and edicts that unapologetically interfere with the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and way of life.

Recently, such repression and religious interference have intensified considerably. Heightened official and security presence within monasteries, continued "patriotic education" campaigns that require monks to denounce the Dalai Lama, restrictions on movement and travel abroad, and limitations on teaching of the Tibetan language in schools, are just some examples of the alarming policy trends of recent years. According to the State Department's latest Human Rights Report, of great concern are the continued "serious human rights abuses, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, extrajudicial detention, and house arrests in Tibetan areas." In this vein, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China has obtained records of **626** Tibetan political prisoners and detainees, the vast majority apprehended following the social disturbances of 2008. Human rights groups believe that the actual number of Tibetan political prisoners is, in fact, much higher.

As a response to this dire human rights situation and in order to bring attention to the Tibetans' desperation, grief, and helplessness in the face of China's draconian policies, Tibetans have begun committing self-immolations. Since February 2009, a reported 118 Tibetans inside China have set fire to themselves. One hundred and eighteen people went through unimaginable agony, in hopes that the world will take notice of their plight and will stand against the willful destruction and disappearance of the Tibetan culture, language, religion, and way of life.

In response to the rising number of self-immolations, instead of critically evaluating its own policies, China's leaders chose to blame the Dalai Lama, Tibetan separatists, foreign groups, and other alleged instigators for inciting restiveness in Tibetan areas and encouraging self-immolations. Rather than recognizing that such a desperate and extreme form of protest requires

dialogue and reconciliation, the Chinese government has increased the level of repression of Tibetans, through unlawful detention, abuse, torture, and enforced disappearances.

In the spirit of continued repressions, the PRC recently imposed a “grid” system on the Tibetan territories, which ensures close surveillance over Tibetans, by dividing their neighborhoods and communities into smaller units, each with several administrative and security staff. Under the guise of the so-called “social stability maintenance” policy, the grid system is characterized by egregious violations of privacy, very high levels of police presence, and an overall atmosphere of intimidation.

Such continued crackdown with no apparent consideration by authorities of alternatives to dealing with the growing dissatisfaction in Tibet, signals the Chinese government’s lack of intention to accommodate Tibetans’ aspirations for greater autonomy. This approach, however, contradicts China’s own interest in building a harmonious society, in which the interests of all citizens are preserved. The integrity of China as a *people’s* republic inevitably suffers when it mistreats and disenfranchises its ethnic and religious minorities, or forces them to blend into a mainstream that is alien and destructive to their very identify. Historical evidence, empirical research, and common sense suggest that forced assimilation will never lead to lasting peace, but will continuously perpetuate individual and collective anguish.

And this is why, echoing the words of the former Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Maria Otero, I call upon the Chinese government to re-evaluate its policy toward Tibet, to permit Tibetans to express their grievances freely, publicly, peacefully, and without fear of retribution, to allow journalists, diplomats and other observers unrestricted access to China’s Tibetan areas, and, importantly, to engage in dialogue with those who represent the voice of the Tibetan people without preconditions. I sincerely hope that one day soon we will see a peaceful political solution that would allow Dalai Lama and about 150,000 other Tibetans around the world to return safely to their land.

Today, we are privileged to hear from individuals who have profound knowledge of the human rights situation in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas. I thank you all for the work you do, for your

unwavering commitment, and for the passion with which you fight for human rights in Tibet. I look forward to hearing your testimony.