



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

Tibet: Freedom of Religion

July 12, 2017

8:30 – 10:00 AM

2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning. I join my esteemed colleague and Commission Co-Chair Randy Hultgren in welcoming you to this Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission hearing on religious freedom in Tibet.

I especially want to thank the distinguished witnesses who are joining us this morning. I will introduce them shortly, but I want to note that three of them have traveled long distances to be with us today – from Indiana, California, and Dharamsala, India -- and we greatly appreciate their presence.

This is the fourth hearing that this Commission has held on Tibet since 2011. Our last one was almost exactly two years ago, on July 14, 2015, just after I received the news of the tragic and unnecessary death of the revered Tibetan monk Tenzin Delek Rinpoche in a Chinese prison.

At the time of his death, he was in the thirteenth year of a twenty-one year sentence for “inciting separatism,” a charge he steadfastly denied. He was serving his unjust sentence under very harsh conditions. He was not well, so at a minimum he should have been released on medical parole. But that didn’t happen, and he died in Chinese custody. I called at the time for an international investigation into his death. But that has not happened.

Everything I said two years ago I am compelled to say again today.

You are here and I am here because we care about the fundamental rights of Tibetans – to speak and teach their language, protect their culture, travel within and outside their country, and worship as they choose.

But the situation in Tibet, which was dire two years ago, has only gotten worse since.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has now been in exile for 58 years. The dialogue between the Chinese government and representatives of the Dalai Lama that could provide a means to address Tibetan grievances remains suspended.

And as we will hear today, repression of the fundamental right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion has intensified. Tibetan Buddhists face extensive controls on their religious life – an intrusive official presence in monasteries, pervasive surveillance, limits on travel and communications, and ideological reeducation campaigns. Religious expression and activism have been met with violent repression, imprisonment and torture.

According to our own State Department, as of last August, 69 monks, nuns or Tibetan reincarnate teachers were known to be serving sentences in Chinese prisons -- although the real number is likely much higher.

And the Chinese government continues to claim the prerogative to decide who will succeed the Dalai Lama, who just turned 82 years old.

All of this, and the Chinese government suffers no apparent cost. There are no consequences for denying the basic human rights of the Tibetan people.

I believe that this is wrong and must change. We need to be doing something different – we need to change the status quo.

One thing that should happen: Permit His Holiness the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet for a visit if he so desires. He is recognized around the world as a man of peace. He should be able to visit his homeland.

I hope other ideas will come from our discussion today, because the situation is urgent. We need to take concrete steps to protect the Tibetan culture, religion and way of life before time runs out.

And let me be clear: this Commission will continue to express its deep bipartisan concern regarding human rights abuses against the Tibetan people until those abuses stop occurring, and Tibetans are able to develop and experience the autonomy they seek.