



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 and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's hearing on freedom of religion in Tibet. I would like to thank our witnesses for coming here today to share their expertise with us.

The protection of religious freedom in Tibet has been a longstanding issue of deep concern for the Lantos Commission and members of Congress. We have made efforts to increase travel by United States' citizens and officials to Tibet through the "Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act" and have written to the President underscoring the need for a Special Coordinator of Tibetan Issues. As our witnesses today share their insights on the ongoing systematic suppression of religious freedom, we are reminded that there is far more to be done.

Freedom of belief is perhaps the most foundational of human rights, because it serves as the basis for every other right that we as human beings claim. Freedom of speech, the right to public assembly, the right to a fair trial, and every other fundamental human right is baseless without the freedom to believe and think however one chooses.

Unfortunately, repression of religious freedom in Tibet has worsened this past year.

According to this year's United States Commission on International Religious Freedom report on China, the current Communist Party Secretary of Tibet, Wu Yingjie, publicly said he expects the party's control over religion in Tibet to increase. This has unfortunately been the case so far.

Last July, the Chinese government launched a sweeping operation to demolish significant portions of the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute located in Sichuan Province. Larung Gar is home to an estimated 10,000 to 20,000 monks, nuns, laypeople, and students of Buddhism from all over the world. Local officials instituting the demolition order referred to the project as ‘construction’ or ‘renovation’ to reduce the number of residents to no more than 5,000 by the end of September 2017. As a result, officials have evicted thousands of monastics, laypeople, and students, some of whom reportedly were locked out of their homes before they could collect their belongings. Many were forced to sign pledges promising never to return, and others were compelled to undergo forced indoctrination in so-called “patriotic reeducation programs.”

Although 2016 did witness the release of several Tibetan prisoners who completed their sentences, USCIRF notes that others were arbitrarily detained and charged. For example, in March 2016, Chinese police arrested Tashi Wangchuk, an advocate known for promoting a deeper understanding of the Tibetan language, on “separatism” charges. His case is pending, and he could serve up to 15 years if convicted.

Finally, in light of the Dalai Lama’s advancing age, now 82, the question of his succession has become a major source of tension within the Chinese government. The government is claiming the power to select the next Dalai Lama.

Regardless of doctrine or belief system, no religious group in the world should have their beliefs dictated to them or repressed by their government. Even more so when the purpose of these government policies is to further oppress and destroy a unique cultural heritage.

These reports of increasing and intensifying crackdowns on the religious freedom of Tibetans are deeply troubling, and underscore the urgency of international support. I look forward to hearing the insights and recommendations from our distinguished panel of witnesses on how best the United States can encourage and promote religious freedom in Tibet.