

A SHORT NOTE ON RECENT TIBETAN-CHINESE RELATIONS

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When I began preparing my remarks for this briefing two weeks ago, I started with a mention of Radio Free Asia's April 10th report of a Tibetan protester who burned herself to death. This was to be the 138th such protest by a Tibetan since 2009. The protester, Yeshi Khando, a 47 year old nun of the Chokri Ngagon Nunnery, set herself on fire and died close to the prison and police station in Kanzi, in eastern Tibet. Chinese Security forces immediately took away her body and later informed her family. But as of today, her body has not been handed over to her family.

Before I had compiled any further details of this story, another death took place on April 15th, this time by a 50 year old man, NeiKyab. Such deaths by fire are commonly referred to as "self-immolations", a term much too mild, perhaps even suggestive of a religious practice or offering of some kind. In reality they are simple acts of protest and desperation. We know from the previous 137 who have died in similar manner, through their last words with friends and family and testaments they have left behind, that each one of them made their sacrifice hoping to draw attention to the unbearable injustice of Chinese rule over the Tibetan people. And almost every one of them have called for the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet.

The world needs to be reminded that these acts of desperation reflect the deeply flawed policies of the Chinese government ever since the incorporation of Tibetan homelands into the People's Republic of China when it was established. Only after the escape of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and some 85,000 Tibetans to India in 1959 did the world learn of the severity of the Chinese

occupation of Tibet and the great damage that was being done to Tibetan society, religion and culture.

While Tibet was completely sealed off to the rest of the world in 1959, the first reopening in 1979 revealed and confirmed the unprecedented scale of Chinese misrule of twenty years; the untimely deaths of some 1.2 million Tibetans, and the destruction of over 12,000 monasteries throughout Tibet that left only a handful partially standing. During this short period even the environment and the wildlife of Tibet suffered extensively; deforestation, soil erosion and crop failures, and the excessive silting and flooding of the rivers that flow into neighboring Chinese provinces. Even the unique and rare species of wildlife on the Tibetan plateau suffered unprecedented hunting by Chinese personnel during this period.

However, with the end of the Cultural Revolution and the return of Deng Xiaoping a hopeful phase began for Tibet. The General Secretary of the Communist Party, Hu Yaobang, visited Tibet and reordered priorities for Tibetan concerns and needs, and even called for and began the immediate reduction of 80% of Chinese cadres in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Deng Xiaoping also allowed four delegations of exile Tibetan leaders selected by the Dalai Lama to tour Tibetan areas. This was followed by a series of dialogue teams that meet with Chinese officials, on and off, from the mid 1980s. The Special Envoys of the Dalai Lama, who later headed these talks, worked to find a framework that would provide genuine autonomy for all the Tibetan areas while ensuring key responsibilities for defense and international relations rested with the Chinese Government, all within the framework of the People's Republic of China.

However, since the last of such meetings in 2010 there have been no indication of any willingness on the part of the Chinese government to meet with His Holiness the Dalai Lama or his representatives. In fact, last week, the State Council Information Office issued its latest White Paper on Tibet ruling out any meaningful negotiations with His Holiness the Dalai Lama saying that “the ‘Tibet issue’ and ‘a high degree of autonomy’ are not up for discussion”. It further stated that any discussion would "be limited to seeking solutions for the Dalai

Lama to completely abandon separatist claims and gain the forgiveness of the central government and the Chinese people”.

While this latest statement in the White Paper is not completely new, the tone is more strident and condescending to say the least. But more worrisome to the Tibetan people is the heightened repression and control over Tibetan life, and new restrictions that are being imposed. For the record, I would like to refer to the report issued by the International Campaign for Tibet on April 14th about a new set of regulations being implemented in the Rebkong area in Amdo, Qinghai Province.

These new regulations curtailing Tibetan speech and expression, especially cultural and religious activities seen as sympathetic to Tibetan strivings for greater freedom or expressions of regard for the Dalai Lama, is best summarized in the ICT report itself which states: “The 20 points show that in the current political climate, almost any expression of Tibetan identity or culture, no matter how mild, can be characterized by the authorities as “splitist” and therefore “criminal.” Definitions of what constitutes “criminal” activity are deliberately opaque, giving leeway for lower-level officials and security personnel to apply harsh penalties. The points are being circulated in Rebkong in the context of an increasingly aggressive approach by the Chinese Communist Party authorities that escalate the crackdown in lay society and strengthens Communist Party control over Tibetan Buddhist practice, weakening religious institutions still further.”

The United States Congress has consistently expressed deep concern for the well being and the freedoms the Tibetan people, and President Obama, and several previous presidents, have also called on the Chinese to meet and talk to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Unfortunately, these urgings by the United States, as forthright and as civil as they may be, have been consistently ignored by the Chinese. The tragedy of Tibet is now in its seventh decade and the recent acts of self-sacrifice deserve more than just sympathetic attention; they demand actions and words that will move the Chinese government; words and deeds to make them fully cognizant of what is going on Tibet, fully cognizant of their failed

policies, and fully cognizant of the rights and wishes of the Tibetan people. All of us in free and democratic societies have this responsibility, and we must succeed in helping the Chinese government to amend their ways and to fully respect the universal human rights of each individual Tibetan and the rights of the Tibetans as a people to determine their own future.