

TLHRC Briefing

Tibet 101

Tuesday, April 21, 2015

3:00 PM – 4:00 PM

215-HVC – US Capitol Building

Opening Remarks

Good afternoon, and welcome to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission's *Tibet 101* briefing. I especially want to thank our expert panelists for their contributions today, and I also thank the staff of the Commission for organizing this briefing.

All of us are here today because we care about the fundamental human rights of Tibetans, including the right to worship as they please, and to enjoy and protect their culture. But we may be running out of time to guarantee those rights. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, will soon celebrate his 80th birthday. Recently the Chinese government asserted its right to approve his successor. The very continuation of the line of Tibetan spiritual leadership and reincarnation is in question.

The purpose of this briefing is to provide some history of the human rights struggle in Tibet and discuss where things stand today. Two months from now, on June 25th, the Commission will hold a full hearing on the human rights situation in Tibetan areas of China. We hope these two events will help us identify new, creative ideas to help to ensure the basic human rights of Tibetans in the future.

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 exiled 14th Dalai Lama to address the issue of repression in Tibet. After that, first the Caucus and then the Commission held many more events on human rights in Tibet. Unfortunately, we still need to continue the tradition, because observers continue to document human rights abuses in the Tibetan areas of China – abuses that are linked to the struggle over Tibetan autonomy.

Since 1950, Tibetans have resisted the rule of the People's Republic of China. The repression of a Tibetan uprising in 1959 provoked the Dalai Lama and 80,000 followers to flee into exile. The establishment of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1965 did not end the tensions -- unrest erupted as recently as 2008, leading to the deaths of some 200 people. Human rights observers have documented at least 639 Tibetan political prisoners and detainees.

Since 2009, more than 130 Tibetans inside China have taken the unimaginable step of setting themselves on fire -- at least 112 are believed to have died. Some chose self-immolation to protest Chinese government policies, others to call for the return of the Dalai Lama. In response, authorities have intensified official reprisals, allowing persons found to have assisted a self-immolator to be charged with homicide.

The human rights problems in Tibet are neither new, nor unknown. On the contrary, Tibet is a very sensitive issue in U.S.-China relations. U.S. government policy is supposed to be guided by the Tibetan Policy Act of 2002, which encourages dialogue between the Chinese government and representatives of the Dalai Lama. The two sides held nine rounds of talks between 2002 and 2010 but reached no agreements. No talks have been held since 2010. Meanwhile, the Chinese government does not grant the U.S. the same access to the People's Republic that we grant China -- and it imposes even greater restrictions on access to Tibet.

Last week the Chinese government issued a new white paper on Tibet with its version of history and an unprecedented demand that the Dalai Lama make "a public statement acknowledging that Tibet has been an integral part of China since antiquity," as a pre-condition for improving relations with Beijing. The white paper insists that the Third Way -- the policy of working to achieve the greatest possible autonomy within the framework of the Chinese constitution -- is just a front for gaining independence for Tibet. The Chinese government "hopes that the Dalai Lama will put aside his illusions in his remaining years and face up to reality, adapt his position . . . and do something of benefit to overseas compatriots in exile."

As I said at the beginning, we need some new ideas; we need to do something different. All over the world we are seeing that repressing cultural and religious minorities has terrible, often violent, consequences. Why is it so hard to imagine autonomy? How can we help fearful authorities understand that mistreatment, disenfranchisement and the forced assimilation of ethnic minorities never produces the security they so desire?

I look forward to hearing your testimonies, and working with you in the search for new strategies.

Thank you.