



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Sweden charges Tibetan with espionage for Chinese government, highlighting pressures on exile communities

<https://www.savetibet.org/sweden-charges-tibetan-with-espionage-for-chinese-government-highlighting-pressures-on-exile-communities>

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In the first known case of a Western government bringing criminal charges against a Tibetan accused of espionage, Sweden has indicted a 49-year old man for spying on Tibetans in exile for the Chinese government. The case, which will be the subject of a court trial, highlights the threats to Tibetan communities all over the world as China continues to intensify both its heavy securitization and surveillance mechanisms in Tibet and its overseas influence operations.

While it is known that Tibetans are informed upon across the Tibetan diaspora, particularly due to the heightened and more systematic activity of China's United Front Work Department, this is the first time that a Western government has brought criminal charges against a Tibetan. In 2010, in a linked investigation, Sweden sentenced a Uighur man who had been caught informing on other Uighurs to a year and ten months in prison - the highest penalty ever for an intelligence case of this kind in Sweden.

In a strongly-worded statement on Wednesday (April 11), state prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist described the Chinese government as a "totalitarian regime", telling the Swedish newspaper Dagens Nyheter that: "This is a very serious crime. Espionage affects very vulnerable people. People who have escaped to Sweden from totalitarian regimes must feel safe to enjoy their basic freedoms, such as the right to protest against a regime without their relatives being put at risk."¹

The apparent un-masking of a man who had been closely involved with diaspora activities sent a chill through the tightly-knit Tibetan community in Sweden, who say they are aware of families in Tibet who have received warnings about their relatives overseas. This is consistent with a common pattern among exile Tibetan and Uighur communities worldwide as the Chinese authorities extend their reach beyond the PRC, involving increasing pressure on exiles from Tibet and Xinjiang through seeking to silence any criticism of China and to muzzle political protest.

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: "At a time when China is increasingly aggressive in its interference with democratic societies in the West, with this investigation Sweden has set an important precedent for other countries in challenging the unacceptable levels of

¹ Cited by New York Times, 'Sweden Accuses Man of Spying on Tibetan Refugees for China', by Christina Anderson, April 12, 2018

intimidation and pressure on an already vulnerable exile community. While this is to be welcomed, Sweden and other governments should not ignore the role of Chinese operatives at higher levels who reside in-country or travel freely in European Union member states, managing a network involving intimidation and propaganda and recruiting individuals who can often be under pressure to inform on others in order to obtain visas to see family members, or because of threats to families in Tibet.”

Even in exile, Tibetans are under frequent surveillance, including within their communities, and levels of distrust and suspicion can be high in certain circumstances. If they participate in peaceful demonstrations against the Chinese government, or speak out in international media, relatives inside Tibet can be threatened, called in for questioning, or even imprisoned. “We know they can do anything to our families,” one Tibetan in exile in Europe told ICT. “They have complete power over them while we are here, and we feel helpless.”

Chinese officials at Embassies in the West have been known to make issuing visas for trips to Tibet contingent upon requests to inform upon others in the community, which fuels suspicion. Such activities are undertaken by Chinese officials from the United Front Work Department (whether based in Chinese embassies and consulates in the West where there is a sizable Tibetan community² or travelling from Beijing), taking advantage of the openness of Western countries.

Swedish citizens also threatened by China

The criminal charges against the Tibetan in Sweden, who was named in the New York Times and other media reports, follow various incidents in which China has made aggressive interventions not only to Tibetan refugees but to Swedish politicians and diplomats. Several Swedish MPs received threatening phone calls from the Chinese Embassy in advance of a planned meeting with the President of the Central Tibetan Administration Lobsang Sangay, last November (2017). At least one of the MPs was personally threatened. MP Kerstin Lundgren posted on Facebook that officials from the Chinese Embassy warned her in “an aggressive way” “not to meet people from, or talk about, Tibet.”³

A Chinese-Swedish publisher, Gui Minhai, who was abducted by Chinese agents after angering Beijing over books about the Communist party’s elite, was snatched for a second time while travelling to Beijing by train with two Swedish diplomats in January (2018). The diplomats had been taking Gui Minhai for an urgent medical checkup at the Swedish Embassy. A spokesman for Sweden’s Foreign Ministry said afterwards that Stockholm was taking “vigorous action” at the highest political level in response to Gui’s detention,⁴ although more recently the Swedish Foreign Minister was criticized for signaling capitulation to China over the case when she said that it was a “consular matter.”⁵

² Ethnic Tibetan officials from the Chinese United Front Work Department are posted in their diplomatic missions in New Delhi, Kathmandu, Zurich, Brussels, New York, Canberra, and Ottawa, with the specific task of interacting with the Tibetan community in these countries.

³ <http://inbeijing.se/bulletin/2017/11/18/kinas-ambassad-hotar-svenska-riksdagledamoter/>, posted November 18, 2017, by Jojje Olsson (in Swedish)

⁴ Cited in The Guardian, January 22, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/22/swedish-bookseller-allegedly-snatched-by-chinese-agents-from-train-gui-minhai>

⁵ Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström said in a recent interview with Swedish Radio that Sweden, as a small country, lacks the tools to confront China, except through “silent diplomacy.” Peter Dahlin, a Swedish human rights activist who was the subject of international media attention after he was arrested in China in 2016 in connection with his work for the NGO Chinese Urgent Action Working Group, and researcher Susanne Berger wrote in the Swedish press that: “Wallström made her statement with the understanding that her remarks would be seen as a capitulation by

It is not known whether these incidents directed at Swedish citizens were linked to Stockholm's decision to prosecute the Tibetan man charged last week. The investigation goes back many years; according to a Swedish journalist, the Swedish authorities had begun to investigate the man, Dorjee (not his full name), since he moved to a suburb of Stockholm in 2007, five years after his arrival in Sweden.⁶

China 'is the black hand'

Jamyang Choedon, chairman of the Tibetan Community organization in Sweden, told ICT that the prosecution had been shocking to the community of around 140 Tibetans in Sweden: "It is frightening, particularly when we consider the implications to those with families in Tibet. Some of them received visits from security personnel warning them to tell their relatives not to participate in political protests against China in Sweden – although it is not known if this is linked to this particular individual. But it is encouraging that the government has taken this investigation so seriously and is the first to do so."

Jamyang Choedon added that she and others in the Tibetan community are urging for caution, and for Tibetans in the diaspora not to rush to judgement. "We must remember that China is the black hand here, creating such division, and enabling such situations to arise."

A Tibetan from Amdo living in Europe said: "No Tibetan living in Europe or America will be surprised to hear about this sad situation. Everywhere that Tibetans are settled – Brussels, Britain, Zurich or New York – it is known that the Chinese authorities are working behind the scenes, making threats, spreading suspicion, and damaging the lives of families back in Tibet related to those in exile." In order to ensure the CCP's dominance in Tibet and compliance among Tibetans, the Beijing leadership has presided over intensified militarization, the establishment of a systematic security architecture and increasingly oppressive policies.

China's political agenda as the accused Tibetan proclaims his innocence

Swedish prosecutors said that the man, who has been named in charge sheets by the court in Stockholm, carried out his suspected espionage on "certain people of importance to the Chinese regime", primarily through attending political meetings of the Tibetan diaspora in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe.

According to the Swedish authorities, Dorjee's purpose was to "pass [this] information to representatives of the Chinese state". They referred to a paper trail of money payments, with Swedish prosecutor Mats Ljungqvist telling Swedish broadcaster SVT that the man had been in contact with Chinese officials in Poland and Finland, and was paid 50,000 kronor (\$6,000) on at least one occasion.

the leaders in Beijing. With her words, the Swedish government has once again taken a step to neutralize its own power. In addition, her statement will not be looked upon kindly in European capitals, where Sweden's weak attitude will instead be taken as proof that other EU countries cannot rely on Swedish support in possible future confrontations with China." Svenska Dagbladet on March 27, 2018: <https://www.svd.se/varfor-gor-inte-wallstrom-mer-for-gui-minhai>

⁶ Tobias Andersson Akerblom for Afton Bladet, October 23, 2017, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/krim/a/3lLy0/sapo-misstanker-man-for-flyktingspionage>

Dorjee has denied all the charges, his lawyer Mikael Soderberg told the BBC. In an interview with the Tibetan-language service of Radio Free Asia, he gave an account of meetings he says were “innocent”, telling RFA by phone on April 16: “I have never passed any information about Tibetans to the Chinese embassy.”⁷

Although Dorjee’s full name is given by the New York Times and other media, Jamyang Choeden said that she had asked the media not to do so (he has not been named in full in the Swedish press), reflecting concerns as he is not yet proven guilty.

Dorjee’s Facebook page, which still appears to be active, states that he attended ‘Qinghai Police School’. He is believed to be from the Tibetan area of Amdo, now Qinghai, and escaped from Tibet some years ago before arriving in Sweden. While some reports state that he worked for the Voice of Tibet, based in Oslo, he is not known to have done so formally while in Stockholm.

According to a Swedish journalist who has researched the case, the initial investigation into Dorjee was linked to a classified investigation into the 62-year old Uighur man sentenced to a year and ten months in prison, after gathering information about other Uighurs’ views, travel, asylum applications, and participation in political demonstrations.⁸

Tibetans and Uighurs in the West are increasingly under scrutiny as China expands its reach, with Uighurs under particular pressure. The Chinese authorities have detained at least nine relatives of four U.S.-based journalists for Radio Free Asia’s Uighur service, based in Washington, DC. Two of the relatives believed to be detained are the elderly parents of a reporter called Hoja, who has worked with RFA for 17 years.⁹ The Chinese authorities have detained tens of thousands of Uighurs in the Xinjiang region in recent months, and the RFA reporters are among the few journalists who have provided independent reporting on the crackdown.

In France, Chinese police have been demanded Uighurs living in France hand over the addresses of their home and work, photos, and identity documents including scans of French passports for both themselves and, at times, their French spouses. According to a report in Foreign Policy, China’s policy may be working. Some Uighurs in France are hesitant to speak about China out of fear their families back home may be sent to re-education camps.¹⁰

A report published in February (2018) by two prominent think tanks, Merics and the Global Public Policy Institute, entitled ‘Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China’s Growing Political Influence in Europe’, concluded that: “Russian interference in the democratic processes in Europe and North America has received notable media attention, but Beijing’s political influence efforts in Europe have received less scrutiny. The Chinese Communist Party has recently expanded its efforts to influence Europe’s political and economic elite, media and civil society, in order to promote its authoritarian

⁷ RFA, April 18, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/spying-04182018133403.html>

⁸ Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet, October 23, 2017, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/nyheter/krim/a/3lLy0/sapo-misstanker-man-for-flyktingspionage>

⁹ Committee to Protect Journalists, ‘China detains relatives of RFA Uighur service journalists’, February 28, 2018, <https://cpj.org/2018/02/china-detains-relatives-of-rfa-uighur-service-jour.php>

¹⁰ Foreign Policy, ‘Chinese Police Are Demanding Personal Information From Uighurs in France’, March 2, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/02/chinese-police-are-secretly-demanding-personal-information-from-french-citizens-uighurs-xinjiang/>

ideals. This development poses a significant challenge to liberal democracy as well as European values and interests.”¹¹

The key Party department for implementing this work overseas is the United Front Work Department, described by Xi Jinping as one of the Chinese Communist Party’s “magic weapons”. Xi Jinping is leading an accelerated expansion of political influence policies worldwide and seeks to dominate representations of Tibet globally.

The authors of the Merics/GPPI report recommended that European states need to act swiftly and decisively to inhibit the momentum of the CCP’s influence operations. They recommended several steps, including: a stronger focus on leveraging the collective weight of EU member states, investing more resources into independent China expertise and providing alternatives to Chinese investments in Europe. The authors also call upon Europe to develop a flexible set of investment screening tools and to strengthen national and European security regimes, including cyber-security and counter-intelligence.

¹¹ Mercator Institute of China Studies and the Global Public Policy Institute, published February 2018, <https://www.merics.org/en/publications/authoritarian-advance>