



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

ICT calls on China to allow Tibetans to learn in their mother tongue at UN Forum on Minorities

<https://savetibet.org/ict-calls-on-china-to-allow-tibetans-to-learn-in-their-mother-tongue-at-un-forum-on-minorities/>

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In a statement delivered last week at the 12th Forum on Minority Issues taking place in Geneva on the theme “Education, Language and the Human Rights of Minorities”, ICT highlighted the difficulties that Tibetans in China face to learn in their mother tongue, and the negative human rights impacts of Tibetan language discrimination.

“The lack of possibilities for Tibetans to study in their mother tongue places them at an educational and economic disadvantage.” said ICT’s Policy and Advocacy officer Mélanie Blondelle, who delivered the statement. *“Native-language instruction leads to higher academic performance, which can better equip Tibetan students when competing with Han students for tertiary and career opportunities. The devaluation of the Tibetan language is also a clear violation of their cultural rights, as the Tibetan language – one of Asia’s four oldest and most original languages – is fundamental to Tibetan identity, culture and religion.”*

Blondelle also highlighted the severe consequences facing Tibetans advocating Tibetan language education – citing the case of Tashi Wangchuk. She called on the Chinese government to adopt a “genuine and legally consistent minority education policy” that provides financial support for Tibetan textbook translation, bilingual teacher training, culturally and regionally defined curricula, and viable career pathways for minority-language graduates.

Since 2008, the UN Minority Forum has been held every year. The Forum aims to provide a platform for promoting dialogue and cooperation on issues pertaining to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. This year’s session was attended by over 600 participants from all over the world, including minority representatives, academics and experts, states, NGOs and UN bodies and agencies.

The Forum’s recommendations will be compiled in a report, which will be presented by the UN Special Rapporteur on minority issues at the 43rd session of the Human Rights Council in March 2020.

Following is the full text of ICT’s statement at the Forum:



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International Campaign for Tibet
1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC | 20036 | USA
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343
Press Contact: press@savetibet.org

**12th Session of the Forum on Minority Issues
28-29 November 2019 – Geneva**

**Item 3: Public policy objectives for education in, and the
teaching of, minority languages**

Statement by the International Campaign for Tibet

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am speaking on behalf of the International Campaign for Tibet to draw the Forum’s attention to the difficulties that Tibetans in the People’s Republic of China face to learn in their mother tongue. I also want to highlight the negative human rights impacts of Tibetan language discrimination.

In recent years, due to the increasingly assimilationist policies implemented by the Chinese authorities to safeguard “national unity and harmonious society”, the Tibetan language has been significantly marginalized with Tibetan-medium instruction drastically downgraded in favor of Chinese-medium instruction.

Today, while primary-level classes are taught in Tibetan in many Tibetan areas, instruction at secondary, tertiary and vocational levels are in Mandarin in all subjects other than Tibetan language classes.¹ Informal Tibetan language classes offered by small private groups or monasteries have also been the target of state control. In December 2018, the Qinghai Nangchen county government published a notice banning language classes in monasteries over the winter break, describing them as “ideological infiltration amongst the youth” and a form of disguised political opposition to the government.”² Our research has also identified a serious lack of funding and institutional support for producing Tibetan-language learning materials and bilingual teacher training courses.

Despite stipulations and rules that “make clear that equal attention be given to Tibetan and Han-Chinese languages in the Tibet Autonomous Region, with the Tibetan language as the major one,”³ the lack of possibilities for Tibetans to study in their mother tongue places them at an educational and economic disadvantage. Native-language instruction leads to higher academic performance, which can better equip Tibetan students when competing with Han students for tertiary and career opportunities. The devaluation of the Tibetan language is also a clear violation of their cultural rights, as the Tibetan language – one of Asia’s four oldest and most original languages – is fundamental to Tibetan identity, culture and religion. China’s Constitution and Law on Regional National Autonomy in fact recognizes the right of ethnic minority groups to use and develop their own language.

Despite these legal protections, Tibetans who express concerns about Chinese language policies are accused of “inciting separatism” and face severe consequences. A prominent example is that of Tashi Wangchuk, a businessman from Yushu, Qinghai, who was sentenced to 5 years in prison in May 2018 for his advocacy for Tibetan-language education.⁴ More recently, Sonam Palden, a 22-year-old monk was detained in Ngaba County town and has been held

¹ In its concluding observation following its review of China in August 2018, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed concerns about the situation in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in particular, where reports showed that Tibetan language teaching in schools “has not been placed on equal footing in law, policy and practice with Chinese, and that it has been significantly restricted.”

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CERD/Shared%20Documents/CHN/CERD_C_CHN_CO_14-17_32237_E.pdf.

² *China: Tibetan Children Banned from Classes*, Human Rights Watch, 30 January 2019,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/30/china-tibetan-children-banned-classes>.

³ “Stipulations of the Tibet Autonomous Region on the Learning, Use and Promotion of the Tibetan Spoken and Written Language” referred to in White Paper: Regional Ethnic Autonomy in Tibet, 24 May 2004 <http://www.china-un.org/eng/zt/xzwt/t418924.htm>.

⁴ *A Tibetan Tried to Save His Language. China Handed Him 5 Years in Prison.*, The New York Times, 22 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/world/asia/tibetan-activist-tashi-wangchuk-sentenced.html>.

incommunicado since 19 September for posting critical views of China's language policy on his WeChat account.⁵

Given these developments, there is reason for grave concern about the future of the Tibetan language, with particular respect to the protection of the right of Tibetans to use their own language in legal, administrative and judicial fields or in work environments, and their right to ensure the survival of the Tibetan language for future generations.

We would therefore like to call on China to adopt a genuine and legally consistent minority education policy. We also recommend government support for policies that fund Tibetan textbook translation, bilingual teacher training, culturally and regionally defined curricula, and viable career pathways for minority-language graduates.

Thank you.

⁵ *Monk detained for criticizing China's policy on Tibetan language at high risk of torture*, Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, 11 November 2019, <https://tchrd.org/monk-detained-for-criticising-chinas-policy-on-tibetan-language-at-high-risk-of-torture/>.