



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

New Tibet special coordinator encourages youth at ICT event

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You have a big job ahead of you, the new special coordinator for Tibetan issues told Tibetan American youth at an International Campaign for Tibet event last week.

Assistant Secretary Robert A. Destro, who took on the special coordinator position in the State Department last month, was speaking Nov. 19 on [ICT's Tibet Talks](#), a live video series featuring conversations with important leaders, thinkers, activists and artists.

Destro appeared alongside Tibetan Americans Aftab Pureval, clerk of the courts for Hamilton County, Ohio, and Dawa Lokyitsang, a PhD student at the University of Colorado, Boulder, in a special Tibet Talk for young Tibetan leaders and other supporters of Tibet.

The virtual event, which streamed live on [ICT's website](#) and [Facebook page](#), helped fill the role of ICT's [Tibetan Youth Leadership Program](#), which could not take place in person this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Three graduates of the youth leadership program—Pasang Lhamo, Rinchen Phuntsok and Jigme Gorap—asked Destro questions during the event, as did Tenzin Gyaldatsang, a college freshman from Minnesota. ICT President Matteo Mecacci and Director of Outreach Tencho Gyatso moderated the discussions.

US support for Tibet

Throughout his conversation, Destro made it clear the US government [stands with the people of Tibet](#), a historically independent country that China [annexed more than 60 years ago](#) and continues to rule with an iron fist.

“From the passage of the [Tibetan Policy Act](#) in 2002 and the [Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act](#) of 2018, to funding vital Tibetan institutions and fellowships, we work together with the international community to fight against the deterioration and dismantling of the Tibetan culture, language and religion,” Destro said.

In his new job as the special coordinator, Destro hopes “to be able to facilitate dialogue between [His Holiness the Dalai Lama](#), his representatives and Chinese authorities,” he said. “The [Chinese Communist Party’s] constant criticism of His Holiness and its refusal to engage with him and his representatives shows that the CCP continues to act in bad faith.”

Destro added that the US will also maintain its efforts to secure the [release of the Panchen Lama](#), the reincarnated [Tibetan Buddhist](#) leader whom the Chinese government kidnapped in 1995 when he was only six.

“We have to ask ourselves who put the CCP in charge of religion, language and culture,” Destro said. “The answer is nobody.”

Inspiring the next generation

Destro said the US “will push for [meaningful autonomy in Tibetans areas](#), as well as respect for the fundamental freedoms and the [human rights that the CCP routinely violates](#).”

However, he told the young Tibetan Americans who participated in the event that they have to play a leading role in telling the government how to support the Tibetan people.

“The question of how we stand with you is a question that we need to ask you,” Destro said, “because at the end of the day, you’re the ones who have to carry this ball.”

Destro encouraged the youth leaders to be persistent and specific in telling their elected representatives which policies to support.

He recommended creating wish lists of actions they want the government to take. He also advised them to focus on building relationships, as those will provide the groundwork for years of sustained support.

“If you show up as a college freshman in your congressperson’s local office and say look, I want to work with you on Tibetan issues, if they throw you out, I’ll be real surprised,” Destro said. “That is how these relationships get started.”

Drawing on his own Italian American immigrant background, Destro told the youths they bear the responsibility of carrying Tibetan culture forward.

“You have a big job ahead of you,” he said. “This is where I think we in the US government and other organizations can help you, because everybody has an interest in that preservation of their identity.”

Pathways to success

After Destro’s remarks, the event shifted to a panel discussion with Pureval and Lokyitsang about pathways to success for Tibetan Americans.

Lokyitsang, who said she entered academia as a way to help shape the discourse on Tibet, talked about taking part in ICT’s Tibetan Youth Leadership Program and other grassroots Tibetan activism.

Those experiences helped her learn how best to advocate for support for Tibet.

“My experience at the [US] Capitol through ICT, what that has taught me is [to] know what are the Tibet issues and the Tibet cards that you do have right now,” she said.

Pureval, who is half Tibetan and half Indian, marveled at the fact that someone from his background could win election to a county-wide office in the United States.

He encouraged young Tibetans to get involved in public service.

“People will tell you, just like they told me, that you’re too young, or you’re too inexperienced, or you’re too brown, or your accent is too strong, or your name is too funny,” he said. “There will be people who tell you that you can’t do it.

“And you know what? That is crap. The truth is you are exactly who we need in public service right now.”

In addition to ICT, several Tibetan American associations across the country shared the live Tibet Talk with their members.

[Watch ICT's Tibet Talk with Robert A. Destro, Aftab Pureval and Dawa Lokyitsang »](#)

[Listen to a podcast of the Tibet Talk »](#)



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