



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

ICT addresses Tibet religious freedom at US Mission in Geneva event

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December 7, 2020

Religious freedom and the succession of the Dalai Lama should be at the top of the human rights agenda in dealing with China, the International Campaign for Tibet's outreach director said at a US Mission in Geneva event last week.

Tencho Gyatso was one of the main speakers at "Religious Freedom in Tibet: The Appointment of Buddhist Leaders and the Succession of the Dalai Lama," hosted Dec. 4 by Ambassador Andrew Bremberg, permanent representative of the United States of America to the Office of the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva.

The online discussion also featured:

- Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback
- Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Robert A. Destro
- President of the Central Tibetan Administration Dr. Lobsang Sangay

"The [suppression of religious freedom in Tibet](#) and the efforts by the Chinese government to control the succession of His Holiness the Dalai Lama are core issues for the survival of Tibetan civilization and its future," Gyatso said. "I welcome international diplomatic efforts, such as this one, to raise awareness to support a sustainable political solution. These efforts are needed more than ever today."

Dalai Lama's succession

Gyatso, a Tibetan American, began her remarks by saying the institution of the Dalai Lama—especially the [current, 14th Dalai Lama](#)—has been "the lifeline of the Tibetan people."

However, the bond between the Dalai Lama and Tibetans will break if the international community allows China to carry out its plan to appoint the next Dalai Lama once the 85-year-old spiritual leader eventually passes away.

"As a representative of the International Campaign for Tibet," Gyatso said, "I call on you all to put the question of religious freedom and the succession of His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the top of your human rights agenda in all your relationships with the People's Republic of China."

History of violations

Gyatso pointed out that China's attempts to interfere in the Dalai Lama's succession are just the latest in its [long history](#) of violating Tibetans' religious freedom and [human rights](#) since annexing Tibet more than 60 years ago.

In 1995, the Dalai Lama recognized Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, a six-year-old living in Tibet, as the reincarnation of the Panchen Lama, one of the most important Tibetan Buddhist leaders.

A few days later, the Chinese government kidnapped the child and his family, replacing him with a fake Panchen Lama who now serves as a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party.

In 2007, China also enacted new rules to give the government authority to recognize or reject Tibetan reincarnate lamas.

China says it will use this power to control the selection of a new Dalai Lama.

"This action, if taken, will be rejected by the Tibetan people both inside and outside Tibet and will not provide legitimacy to Chinese rule," Gyatso said. "We have seen this already with the imposition of a state-sponsored Panchen Lama who does not command the respect of the Tibetan people."

The [Chinese Mission in Geneva issued a statement](#) calling the event a "gross interference" and, using the misnomer "Living Buddhas" for Buddhist reincarnations, insisted that they "must comply with Chinese laws and regulations."

International backlash against China

In contrast to China's growing outrages, the international community has increasingly spoken out against Beijing's abuses in Tibet.

In August 2020, five UN human rights experts and expert bodies [sent a message to the Chinese government](#), declaring that its rules on the appointment of Tibetan Buddhist leaders "may interfere and possibly undermine, in a discriminatory way, the religious traditions and practices of the Tibetan Buddhist minority."

In addition, Gyatso said, the [EU, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands](#) and the US have all affirmed that respect for religious freedom means the Chinese government cannot interfere in the succession of the Dalai Lama.

In the US, the [Tibetan Policy and Support Act](#) will make it official US policy that only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist community can determine his succession. If any Chinese officials interfere in that process, they will face sanctions under the bill.

The bipartisan TPSA [passed the House with an overwhelming majority](#) in January 2020. The bill is currently [awaiting passage by the Senate](#).

List of recommendations

Gyatso ended her remarks with a list of recommendations to defend religious freedom in Tibet:

- Support the [call by 50 UN independent experts](#) to establish an independent and impartial mechanism at the Human Rights Council to monitor and report on the human rights situation in the People's Republic of China. Specifically call for the inclusion of issues related to religious freedom, such as the appointment of religious leaders.
- Continue releasing joint statements at the United Nations on the PRC, and include the issue of religious freedom in Tibet and beyond, particularly the issue of the appointment of religious leaders.
- Publicly raise or reiterate the issue of religious freedom and the appointment of Tibetan Buddhist leaders in government statements, being mindful of the [Dalai Lama's 2011 statement on his reincarnation](#), and raise the issue with the Chinese government bilaterally and multilaterally.
- In national parliaments, pass resolutions in support of religious freedom in the PRC, in particular with regard to the appointment of religious leaders, and seek expert opinions from Tibetan Buddhist leaders in exile.
- Consider including the issue of the appointment of religious leaders in the PRC in legislation that sanctions human rights violations committed by the Chinese Communist Party.

[Watch the Religious Freedom in Tibet event.](#)