



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Foreign journalists say China blocked independent reporting in Tibet

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The Chinese government restricted foreign journalists' ability to report in Tibet last year while obstructing coverage of COVID-19 and carrying out the largest expulsion of foreign journalists from China since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre.

Those are some of the troubling findings in the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China's 2020 annual report, "Track, Trace, Expel: Reporting on China Amid a Pandemic."

The report, released March 1, 2021, evaluates reporting conditions in China, which annexed Tibet more than 60 years ago.

The FCCC based the report on a survey of 150 journalists representing news organizations from 30 countries and regions.

Access to Tibet

The report notes the Chinese government restricts access to the Tibet Autonomous Region, which is the only region that China requires foreign journalists to apply for permission before entering. China often denies that permission, however.

The report says China's State Council and Ministry of Foreign Affairs occasionally organize government-supervised trips to the TAR, which spans most of central and western Tibet. However, they "carefully choose which journalists and organizations are allowed to participate," the report says.

During one of those trips to the TAR last year, journalists were not able to report independently, with government handlers tightly controlling their schedules and police following them if they tried to visit places on their own.

"Our minders in Tibet became very nervous when some foreign media journalists tried to use their drones," one foreign journalist told the FCCC. "They said, 'Tibet is a restricted area' when asked why reporters could not fly their drones in Tibet, which does not geofence drones. Our minders said that 'you still have to have special permission' to fly drones there."

Restrictions on US journalists

Another state-run trip last year stopped in the TAR and Tibetan areas of Qinghai province. However, US journalists and outlets said they were not able to join, with officials telling several correspondents the trip was "full," according to the FCCC report.

The report notes the US passed a law in 2018 designed to pressure the Chinese government to give Americans journalists, diplomats and ordinary citizens the same level of access to Tibet that Chinese citizens have to the United States.

As part of the law, called the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, the State Department announced in July 2020 that it had banned Chinese officials from entering the US over their role in keeping Americans out of Tibet.

In addition, President Biden said in his campaign that he would “insist that the Chinese government restore access to Tibet for US citizens, including our diplomats and journalists.”

That promise was part of Biden’s longer statement on Tibet, in which he said that the “Biden-Harris administration will stand up for the people of Tibet.”

Restrictions by China

The FCCC report states that 6 of 8 correspondents who tried to report from Tibetan areas—such as in Sichuan and Gansu provinces—said they faced restrictions and prohibitions from the Chinese government.

Overall, Chinese officials “dramatically stepped up efforts” to limit the work of foreign correspondents across the country in 2020, the report says.

“All arms of state power—including surveillance systems introduced to curb coronavirus—were used to harass and intimidate journalists, their Chinese colleagues, and those whom the foreign press sought to interview,” the report says.

The disturbing developments include:

- China expelling at least 18 foreign journalists from The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post. The Chinese government also cancelled press credentials and denied visa renewals, leading to “the largest expulsion of foreign journalists since the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre more than three decades ago,” the report says.
- Chinese officers preventing two Australian journalists from leaving the country. One of the journalists said the move showed “the old precedents no longer apply.”
- Chinese authorities obstructing coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in China and has since claimed the lives of more than 2.5 million people around the world.
- China using the coronavirus as a pretext for denying reporters access to certain areas and for preventing them from re-entering China altogether.

ICT quote

International Campaign for Tibet Interim Vice President Tencho Gyatso said:

“As we’ve seen from the coronavirus pandemic over the past year, the cost of China’s press restrictions and secrecy is too much for the world to bear. Yet even as the Chinese government has intensified its crackdowns on foreign journalism and human rights in every area under its control, it has continued to treat Tibet—especially the Tibet Autonomous Region—as a special case.

“We are grateful to the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of China for reporting on the media’s lack of access to Tibet. What the Tibetan people need now is for foreign journalists to be able to report from inside Tibet. We at the International Campaign for Tibet will continue to work with governments around the world to try to make that possible.”



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