



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Tibetans in Lhasa told to restrict religious practice during holy month

<https://savetibet.org/tibetans-in-lhasa-told-to-restrict-religious-practice-during-holy-month>

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The Lhasa City Buddhist Association [has circulated a notice dated May 9, 2021](#) urging Tibetan Buddhists in the Tibetan capital to restrict their traditional religious practice during the holy fourth month of the Tibetan calendar, which began on May 12.

The notice states the reason as the “very significant” risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19, given the situation in “some neighboring countries” and “imported cases” continuing to appear in China itself.

However, these warnings have come even though the Chinese government has not stopped Chinese tourists from visiting Tibet—which China has illegally ruled for more than 60 years—and has in fact boasted of a surge in tourism during the pandemic.

According to Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, the holy fourth month, known in Tibetan as “Saga Dawa,” is when the Buddha was born, became enlightened and passed away. Buddhists consider it a month to perform virtuous actions, including religious practice. Traditionally, Tibetan Buddhists would go on daily circumambulations and pilgrimages to religious centers.

Four points

The Lhasa City circular makes a four-point “proposal” that urges:

1. Tibetans to adopt the “correct view” on religion and not go for the “Lingkor,” which is the most prominent circumambulation route.
2. Monks and nuns to take COVID-prevention actions and do some planting to beautify the environment around their monasteries.
3. General tourists to be “well-behaved tourists.”
4. Monasteries to responsibly uphold harmony and stability and undertake the approach adopted by the Chinese Communist Party and the government on pandemic prevention.

While the announcement does not outrightly ban religious practice during this period, the implication is that engaging in religious rituals will impact the pandemic situation in Lhasa.

Tourism

This reasoning is contradictory to the authorities’ claim that there have been no COVID-positive cases not just in Lhasa but throughout the Tibet Autonomous Region, other than one found and treated in early 2020. The TAR spans about half of Tibet.

The reference to possible imported cases emerging makes sense given that the authorities have not stopped any Chinese tourists from coming to Lhasa and other Tibetan areas. So far, COVID variants have been found in major Chinese cities.

The state media outlet [Xinhua reported on May 7](#) that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of tourists traveling to the TAR “surged in the first quarter of this year compared with the same period of 2019, with tourists arriving by train up 20 percent and those arriving by air up 28 percent, regional data shows.”

In fact, during the May 1 holiday period alone, [TAR authorities said](#) they received a total of 706,700 tourists.

In past years, [the Chinese authorities have imposed restrictions](#) on Tibetan Buddhists’ religious activities during this holy month.

China has also spent decades severely violating [Tibetans’ religious freedom](#), including by [interfering in the selection of Tibetan Buddhist leaders](#), installing police stations inside monasteries and arresting ordinary Tibetans simply for owning photos of the [Dalai Lama](#).

ICT quote

The International Campaign for Tibet said:

“While coronavirus prevention measures are valid as the pandemic continues to afflict the world, the Lhasa authorities seem to be using them as a pretext to continue reducing space for Tibetan Buddhists to practice their faith during this holy month. China itself has claimed that there have been no COVID-positive cases in the TAR since the first one in 2020. Moreover, China has refused to stop the flow of Chinese tourists to Tibet, undermining its stated goal of reducing the spread of the virus and adding to the preferential treatment Chinese citizens receive in the Tibetan homeland.”

Circular

The following is the ICT translation from Tibetan to English of the Lhasa City Buddhist Association circular.

APPEAL NOTE

To the religious believing community, monks & nuns, and tourists:

In view of some neighboring countries being unable to control the epidemic while within the country there are proliferation, continuous discovery of foreign imported cases, and emergence of variants, epidemic prevention is critical more than before.

In particular, since the duration of "Saga Dawa"¹ is long, with a large number of participants, and involves large gathering, the risk of contracting and spreading of the epidemic is very significant. Placing the people’s lives as the main concern, we propose the following:

1. The religious believers should raise their awareness of self-protection, actively support the party and the government to implement epidemic prevention and control measures, and get the epidemic

¹ Saga Dawa is the Tibetan name for the fourth month in the Tibetan calendar.

vaccine, reduce traveling out or gathering, wear masks, wash hands, and go on pilgrimage to nearest and most convenient locations, and not go for circumambulation around the Potala, Barkor² and Lingkor³, etc., where people gather. (They should) hold correct view of religion and perform manageable incense burning ceremony, and animal liberation⁴ ritual.

2. The monks and nuns should voluntarily undertake very well the epidemic prevention and control measures, wear masks, wash hands, enable proper ventilation, regularly check body temperature, sanitize things in public places, and actively get Coronavirus pandemic vaccines; actively involve themselves in carrying out patriotic sanitization activities and tree planting activities and beautify the monastery and surrounding environment.

3. The tourists should take their own initiative to check their temperatures and render support by becoming well-behaved tourists. They should always wear masks and not enter monasteries at their whims, and not be in crowded places.

4. The monasteries should voluntarily uphold the monasteries' harmony and stability, protect and maintain the physical health of the monks and nuns, responsibly take epidemic prevention and control measures, and implement the party and government's measures to prevent and control the epidemic in monasteries. They should undertake the routine religious activities in the simplest way possible.

Lhasa City Buddhist Association

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International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) | 1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC 20036 | United States of America
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | info@savetibet.org

ICT Europe
Funenpark 1D | 1018 AK
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266
icteurope@savetibet.nl

ICT Deutschland e.V.
Schönhauser Allee 163 | 10435
Berlin, Germany
Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087
info@savetibet.de

ICT Brussels
11, rue de la linière | 1060
Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 (0)2 609 44 10
Fax: +32 (0)2 609 44 32
info@savetibet.eu

² Barkor is the traditional circumambulation route that takes pilgrims around the sacred Jokhang Temple.

³ Lingkor is the traditional long circumambulation route that takes pilgrims around a number of holy sites in Lhasa.

⁴ Animal liberation is the tradition of rescuing animals from impending death by buying them and releasing them into rivers, etc. (if fish) or keeping them under protection (if cattle, etc.).