



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Dalai Lama: Religious freedom is ‘freedom of our thought’

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The Dalai Lama defended religious freedom as freedom of thought while calling for an end to religious conflict in a special video message to the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington, DC last week.

“We human beings, unlike other animals, we have this very sharp intelligence and also have the ability to visualize a long future,” he said. “So in that respect, the various different religious traditions develop. So religious freedom is actually in a way the freedom of our thought.”

The summit, a grassroots gathering of civil society and religious groups from around the world, was held from July 13 to 15, 2021. The Office of Tibet-DC hosted a side event at the summit at which Sophie Richardson of Human Rights Watch spoke.

Sam Brownback, the former ambassador at large for international religious freedom, and Katrina Lantos Swett, president of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights, were the summit co-chairs. The event also featured Honorary Senate Co-Chairs Chris Coons, D-Del., and James Lankford, R-Okla., as well as Honorary House Co-Chairs Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, and Chris Smith, R-N.J. Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., sent a video message.

The Dalai Lama, who is one of the most admired people in the United States, is the spiritual leader for millions of Tibetan Buddhists around the globe and a source of spiritual guidance for countless other people.

The Dalai Lama told the summit that fighting between religions should become a thing of the past.

“We should feel now, enough fighting in the name of religion. Enough,” he said. “Now we must work together, live together, so that’s my main message.”

Religious persecution in Tibet

The Dalai Lama spoke to the summit through a video address from Dharamsala, India, where he has lived in exile for more than 60 years.

In his homeland of Tibet—which the watchdog group Freedom House recently declared the least-free country on Earth in a tie with Syria—religious freedom has become virtually nonexistent, thanks to the repressive rule of the Chinese government.

Chinese officials have expelled monks and nuns from their religious institutions, prevented schoolchildren from taking part in religious activities and imprisoned Tibetans simply for owning photos of the Dalai Lama or listening to his teachings.

Just this month, police reportedly arrested more than 20 Tibetans for celebrating the Dalai Lama’s 86th birthday on July 6.

In an opinion piece last week in Newsweek, Brownback, the summit co-chair, and Ngodup Tsering, the Dalai Lama's representative to North America, declared that "China's Relentless Persecution of Tibet Must End Now."

Calling out China's outrageous plan to appoint a future Dalai Lama, the authors noted that the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which became law in late 2020, makes it official US policy that only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist community can decide on his succession. If any Chinese officials try to interfere, they will face sanctions under the new law.

Oneness of humanity

Despite China's oppression in Tibet, the Dalai Lama has remained steadfast in seeking a nonviolent, mutually beneficial solution between Tibetans and Chinese—something that the Tibetan Policy and Support Act requires the US government to pursue.

The Dalai Lama has also been adamant about the need for universal human values that apply to people of all religious backgrounds or no religion at all.

"The various different religious traditions have different philosophies, different traditions, but all carry the same message," he said in his summit video. "A message of love and forgiveness, contentment, self-discipline. So even for nonbelievers, it is very relevant."

He added that he emphasizes the oneness of humanity.

"Entire 7 billion human beings, we are the same," he said.



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@save-tibet.eu