



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Tibet environment, human rights inseparable, China Commission hears

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Working with China on climate change must go hand in hand with addressing its human rights violations in Tibet, the International Campaign for Tibet says in a written testimony submitted to a Congressional hearing today.

The hearing, “China’s Environmental Challenges and US Responses,” was organized by the Congressional-Executive Commission on China. It streamed live this morning, Sept. 21, 2021.

The commission’s co-chair, Rep. James McGovern, D-Mass., entered ICT’s written testimony into the record. ICT is an advocacy group that promotes human rights and democratic freedoms for the Tibetan people.

“Achieving global sustainability—including avoiding the worst impacts of climate disruption—means no longer silo-ing environmental and human rights into conveniently separate political baskets,” ICT says in its testimony. “The Chinese government’s human rights atrocities reinforce its harmful environmental policies and vice-versa.”

Human rights and the environment

Throughout its testimony, ICT lays out the connection between the Chinese government’s abuse of the Tibetan people with its destruction of natural resources in Tibet, which China has brutally occupied for more than 60 years.

Examples include China forcing thousands of Tibetan nomads off the land their ancestors sustainably grazed for generations; arresting and torturing Tibetan environmental activists; and cutting Tibetans off from their traditional Buddhist religion and culture, which emphasize protecting nature and all living things.

China has also used its control over Tibet to clear-cut biologically rich Tibetan forests and to allow rampant, often unregulated mining that causes significant pollution.

In addition, China is furiously building new dams in Tibet. As the source of six major rivers in Asia, Tibet provides water to nearly 2 billion people downstream.

However, a study last year found China used its dams on the Dzachu River in Tibet (known elsewhere as the Mekong) to prevent the flow of water in 2019, contributing to a devastating drought in Southeast Asia.

Recommendations

ICT makes several recommendations in its testimony, including that the Biden administration and Congress include Tibet in its discussions with China at the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference, known as COP26.

“The Biden administration and Congress must ensure the environmental crisis in Tibet, including water security and rapid climate change, is addressed at the COP26 meeting as a crucial part of any finalized

negotiation,” ICT writes. “The Biden administration should consider holding a side event on the issue of the Tibetan environment.”

ICT also urges the administration to implement current US law on Tibet, such as the Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which became law at the end of last year.

“The Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which I was proud to sponsor, sets out US policy on the environment and water resources of the Tibetan Plateau,” McGovern said during today’s hearing. He added that the legislation “directs the secretary of state to support collaborative research, encourage input from Tibetan nomads and promote a regional framework on water security.”

Another piece of legislation that McGovern cosponsored, the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act, which became law in 2018, pushes China to open Tibet to foreign journalists, diplomats and ordinary citizens.

“The international community should promote the opening up of the Tibetan Plateau for scientific research and international collaboration,” ICT’s testimony says, “and facilitate the creation of a regional environmental council that discusses and mitigates environmental issues facing the Hindu-Kush Himalayan Mountains and the Tibetan Plateau.”

Lastly, ICT writes that, “The Biden administration and Congress should include environmental justice as a basic human right in multinational and bilateral treaties.”

Hearing

During today’s hearing, several legislators and witnesses raised concerns about China’s environmental policies in Tibet.

Emily Yeh, professor of geography at the University of Colorado and author of “Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development,” said climate change caused by human activity is a significant problem in Tibet. She cited permafrost melt, the dramatic loss of grassland and other challenges.

Yeh said that some of China’s policies are hurting. Mentioning China’s forced resettlement of Tibetan nomads, she said: “It’s been dubbed a climate adaption strategy, but increasingly, ecological evidence suggests that it’s really not adaptive for the climate.”

Yeh also emphasized that China’s massive dam construction is not carbon-neutral, and the dams are not necessary for energy purposes.

Several members of Congress said that China’s human rights abuses cannot be separated from environmental concerns.

Noting that Chinese officials have threatened to cease cooperation with the US on climate issues if the US continues to criticize China’s human rights violations, McGovern said, “It can’t be an either-or.”

“We’re going to have to thread that needle,” McGovern said.

The commission’s chair, Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., said he hoped the hearing “will demonstrate the US can and must prioritize both climate cation and the steadfast defense of human rights.

“We need to do both,” Merkley said. “We cannot trade away human rights for cooperation in other areas of relationship with China.”



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