



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Commitment to dialogue at State Department Losar celebration

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As Tibetans welcomed the Year of the Water Tiger, US officials marked the Tibetan New Year by committing yesterday to push their Chinese counterparts to respect Tibetans' rights and resume dialogue with Tibetan leaders.

Losar, the traditional New Year celebrated by Tibetans and other Himalayan communities, began Wednesday, March 3, 2022.

To celebrate the joyous occasion, Uzra Zeya, the new US special coordinator for Tibetan issues, hosted a virtual reception at the State Department that featured messages from Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, His Holiness the Dalai Lama's Representative to North America Dr. Namgyal Choedup and Tibetan American communities across the country.

There were also music and cultural performances, as well as words of gratitude from participants in the State Department's Tibetan Scholarship Program.

The International Campaign for Tibet, an advocacy group that helped organize the reception, praised the event: "ICT thanks Special Coordinator Zeya, Secretary Blinken, Representative Choedup and everyone who made the State Department's Losar reception a festive and meaningful event. With these leaders in place, we are confident the United States and its allies can make progress on the goals Special Coordinator Zeya laid out in her remarks, including promoting meaningful dialogue between the Chinese government and Tibetan officials.

"We could also get a glimpse of the preservation of Tibetan cultural traditions by young Tibetan Americans from the Tibetan associations. Recipients of the Tibetan Scholarship Program highlighted the role the US plays in supporting the empowerment of Tibetans. Clearly, there is much for Tibetans and Tibet supporters to feel hopeful about as the Year of the Water Tiger begins."

Tibetans around the world, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, celebrated the holiday through rituals and auspicious messages. The Tibetan leadership, including Pro-tem Chief Justice Commissioner Karma Dadul, Speaker Khenpo Sonam Tenphel and Sikyong Penpa Tsering, issued messages to the community.

US support

Although Losar was a festive event, it came just days after Freedom House, an influential watchdog group, declared Tibet the least-free country on Earth in a tie with South Sudan and Syria.

Despite the Chinese government's efforts to eliminate Tibetans' unique culture, religion and language, Zeya praised Tibetans for working to preserve their traditions and pass them on to the next generation.

She noted that on a previous Losar, the Dalai Lama said in a speech at Macalester College: "In order to make this a more peaceful century, we need to make it a century of dialogue."

“I couldn’t agree more,” Zeya said. “I will actively promote meaningful and direct dialogue without preconditions between the government of the People’s Republic of China and the Dalai Lama or his representatives, leading to a negotiated agreement on Tibet.

“I call on likeminded countries to join this effort and look forward to the discussions to come.”

The Chinese government has refused to negotiate with Tibetan leaders since 2010.

Zeya went on to outline several other priorities for her work as special coordinator, including:

- **Preservation:** Noting that Tibet’s culture, religion and language are at risk, Zeya said that “preservation is a key priority of the Biden-Harris administration and an all-encompassing goal of mine.”
- **Climate change and water security:** With Tibet’s unique environment and water resources facing threats from China’s reckless policies, Zeya said she will work with Special Presidential Envoy for Climate John Kerry and other partners to “keep Tibet in the conversation of how we respond to climate change and encourage sustainable development that respects indigenous culture while protecting the environment.”
- **Access to Tibet:** Although Chinese citizens can travel freely throughout the United States, the Chinese government rarely allows Americans—especially Tibetan Americans—into Tibet, leading the US to pass the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act in 2018. “The United States is asking the [People’s Republic of China] to reciprocate the access PRC officials and other PRC nationals enjoy here in the United States,” Zeya said
- **Transnational repression:** Zeya also called out the Chinese government for surveilling and harassing Tibetans in exile and trying to silence them by threatening their relatives in Tibet. “The PRC must not only cease its harassment, intimidation and surveillance of Tibetan diaspora communities in the United States and elsewhere,” Zeya said, “but must stop its practice of punishing family members living in the PRC in retaliation.”

During her remarks, Zeya also hailed Tibetans for conducting democratic elections in exile last year, which led for the first time to three women serving as kalons, or ministers, in the Kashag, the highest executive office of the Central Tibetan Administration. Zeya also commended Tibetan nurses for their remarkable efforts to help patients during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Secretary of state

Zeya then introduced Blinken, who last year made history as the first secretary of state to speak at the State Department’s Losar reception.

“On behalf of the United States, I offer my warmest wishes to those celebrating Losar,” Blinken said. “The United States honors the strength and resilience of the Tibetan community here in America, across the Himalayan region and around the world.”

Blinken raised the issue of China trying to control the selection of Tibetan Buddhist leaders—including a future Dalai Lama—as well as the Chinese government’s efforts to restrict the use of the Tibetan language inside Tibet, where 95% of schools now teach in Mandarin as their primary language.

“Tibetans, like all people, have the right to practice their customs and pass them on to future generations,” Blinken said. “This includes teaching and speaking the Tibetan language, selecting their religious leaders without interference and freely celebrating holidays and cultural events like Losar.

“Supporting these human rights is a priority for the United States,” Blinken said.

Blinken added that he was honored to meet with the Dalai Lama's representative and other Tibetan leaders in India last year.

"In this new year, we look forward to continuing our close cooperation with Tibetan leaders," he said.

Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama

During his remarks, Choedup, the Dalai Lama's representative to North America, talked about the meaning and traditions behind Losar.

"Losar is not just the start of a new year," he said. "It means something deeper, more profound, a transition to something hopeful and inspirational."

Choedup, who took over his position in December, spoke about growing up in a Tibetan settlement in southern India.

"I have very fond memories of Losar, how as children, we used to count the days before Losar, just as children here do before Christmas," Choedup said. "Losar is also like Thanksgiving: being grateful for what we have, a time of family get-together."

Choedup said that if Tibetans inside Tibet could have one Losar wish granted, the overwhelming majority would choose to see and hear from the Dalai Lama.

"We Tibetans living in the free world are so blessed and lucky to hear and practice his teachings in our daily lives," Choedup said. "So this Losar, as we channel in all our positive energy, I urge everyone to make a Losar resolution that we will do our best to live by and practice the four principal commitments of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in order to achieve or realize his vision of making the 21st century a century of peace and dialogue.

"This is the best Losar gift we can give ourselves, to our brothers and sisters inside Tibet, and to the rest of the world."

Other Losar greetings

After Choedup spoke, the Losar reception shifted to cultural and musical performances representing the Tibetan American communities across the US. The young artists this year were from the Tibetan Association of Santa Fe and the Tibetan Alliance of Chicago.

There were also messages from participants in the State Department's Tibetan Scholarship Program. The program has so far provided support for several hundred Tibetan students and professionals (in exile) seeking higher education and training at US universities.



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