



**Report to Congress on
Access to Tibetan Areas
Section 4 of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 (8 U.S.C. 1182 note)**

Executive Summary

This is the fourth annual report under Section 4 of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act of 2018 (8 U.S.C. 1182 note), enacted December 19, 2018, which requires the Department of State to provide a report to Congress, within 90 days of enactment and annually thereafter for five years, regarding the level of access PRC authorities granted to U.S. diplomats and officials, journalists, and tourists to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and other Tibetan areas in China; a comparison with the level of access granted to other areas of China; a comparison between the levels of access to Tibetan and non-Tibetan areas in relevant provinces; a comparison of the level of access compared to the previous reporting year; and a description of the required permits and other measures that impede travel in Tibetan areas. This report covers 2021, with comparisons to 2020, as applicable.

The PRC authorities systematically impeded travel to the TAR and to many Tibetan areas outside the TAR for U.S. diplomats and officials, journalists, and tourists in 2021. International visitors' travel to the TAR required the approval of TAR government travel permits; TAR authorities regularly denied travel permits to international journalists, diplomats, and other officials often with indications the central government had denied the request. Approval for tourist travel to the TAR was easier to secure but often restricted around sensitive dates. U.S. officials requested via diplomatic note to visit the TAR in February 2021. Despite the embassy reiterating the request with alternate dates over a six-month period, TAR authorities did not approve an official visit to the TAR in 2021. The PRC government hosted two delegations of foreign diplomats from a select group of countries and a delegation of international journalists in the TAR in 2021. For diplomats and officials, travel to Tibetan areas outside of the TAR did not require a permit or special notification beyond the requirements in place for other parts of China.

PRC authorities routinely denied requests to meet with government, religious, and civil society leaders in these areas. PRC security forces used conspicuous monitoring to intimidate U.S. diplomats and officials including while on personal travel to Tibetan areas, followed them, prevented them from meeting or speaking with local contacts, harassed them, and restricted their movement in these areas. Tibetan Americans regularly faced restrictions on their travel to Tibetan areas. Access to these areas for journalists remained restricted and limited.

Impact of COVID-19 Restrictions and the Suspension of Operations at the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in January 2020, PRC authorities have imposed country-wide restrictions on travel within the country and entry to it, which have impacted the ability of foreign diplomats, journalists, and tourists to travel to the TAR and other Tibetan areas. From January to April 2021, the TAR and surrounding provinces implemented a “closed management” system which heavily restricted travel to these areas. These restrictions briefly loosened from May to July 2021, but TAR authorities re-implemented COVID-19 travel restrictions in August 2021. U.S. journalists reporting in predominately Tibetan-inhabited areas outside the TAR were detained, harassed, and removed by local security officials, often under the pretext of COVID-19.

The United States suspended operations at the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu (CG Chengdu) on July 27, 2020, after the PRC government withdrew consent for operation in retaliation to the United States’ withdrawal of consent for the operation of PRC Consulate General in Houston. CG Chengdu had stood at the center of U.S. relations with people in southwestern China, including in Tibetan areas, for 35 years. Following suspension of operations, U.S. Embassy Beijing took responsibility for coverage of Southwest China, including the TAR and Tibetan areas, more than 800 miles away from Beijing, thereby severely constraining the United States’ ability to access Tibetan areas. TAR authorities have not permitted any U.S. embassy visits to the region since the suspension of operations at CG Chengdu, citing U.S. government sanctions on TAR officials and the appointment of U.S. officials to TAR-related roles as the reason for rejecting the requests.

Differences in Access to TAR and Tibetan-Inhabited Areas

While the PRC maintains clear and strict access requirements in order to travel to the TAR, its access requirements for travel to sensitive Tibetan-inhabited areas in other provinces remained ambiguous. Tibetan areas, which historically and currently contain Tibetan populations outside of the TAR, exist in Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan, and Qinghai provinces. Municipal and prefecture-level PRC and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials are often responsible for access restrictions to these areas, making it difficult to determine the rationale and timing for restrictions.

Level of Access PRC Authorities Granted to U.S. Diplomats and Officials, Journalists, and Tourists to the TAR, Other Tibetan Areas, and Other Areas of China

Diplomats and Other Officials

In 2021, the TAR continued to be the only area of China that PRC authorities required diplomats and other non-PRC officials to request permission to visit. Diplomats could not purchase air or train tickets to enter the TAR without official approval. In 2021, the PRC government denied official requests from U.S. Embassy Beijing for the chargé d'affaires to visit the TAR.

Travel to Tibetan areas outside the TAR continued to be restricted for U.S. diplomats in 2021. Ministry of Foreign Affairs and provincial authorities reassured U.S. officials that foreign diplomats were free to travel to Tibetan areas outside the TAR without the presentation of diplomatic notes. However, the PRC required diplomats to submit requests to the provincial foreign affairs office (FAO) in order to conduct meetings with government, religious, and community leaders. Personal travel by U.S. Mission China personnel to Tibetan areas was closely monitored and restricted by authorities, with one officer prevented from boarding an airplane to a Tibetan prefecture and another officer prevented from entering a Tibetan prefecture that was part of a cycling tour.

U.S. mission personnel did not request American Citizen Services visits to the TAR in 2021. In the past, local officials in the TAR had been responsive to consular requests to provide assistance to U.S. citizens but had occasionally delayed their response on emergency access requests made by U.S. consular officers.

Tourists

The PRC government regulated travel of international visitors to the TAR for tourism, a restriction applied by no other provincial-level entity in China. In accordance with a 1989 central government regulation, international visitors, including U.S. citizens, were required to obtain an official confirmation letter issued by the TAR government, which reports to the central government in Beijing, before entering the TAR. Most tourists received such letters by booking tours through travel agencies officially registered with the PRC government. The PRC government mandated a designated tour guide accompany international tourists while in the TAR. Foreigners rarely obtained permission to enter the TAR by road. Authorities denied access to the TAR for many international tourists during periods the PRC government considered politically sensitive, including the March 2021 anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan uprising against China's invasion of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's birthday in July 2021. Due to COVID-19, PRC authorities increased travel restrictions in Tibetan areas, particularly from January through April 2021. Travel restrictions to the TAR during this period applied to all domestic and international travelers. Restrictions also remain in place for entry of U.S. citizens and citizens of other foreign countries to the PRC, due to COVID-19.

The PRC government has not provided official data for 2021, though official media reported 35 million "people-instances" visited the TAR in 2020, a 12.6 percent decrease from 2019. In 2019, CG Chengdu estimated roughly 10,000 U.S. citizens visited the region. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, U.S. Embassy Beijing estimates the number of U.S. citizens who visited the TAR has decreased substantially in 2021.

According to U.S. embassy and consulate contacts, as well as media reports, Tibetan Americans underwent a stricter screening process than other U.S. citizens when applying for PRC visas at PRC embassies. Tibetan Americans reported more frequent harassment by security officials in Tibetan areas than in other parts of China. Some Tibetan Americans reported they self-censored their behavior in the United States out of fear of retribution against their family members in Tibet or fear of losing future access to Tibet.

Journalists

PRC regulations require formal permission for foreign journalists to enter the TAR, but do not have the same formal process for other parts of China. The PRC continued to heavily restrict and control access for U.S. journalists to the TAR.

According to the 2021 annual report of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC), the PRC government denied the requests of all four of the foreign journalists who applied for permission to travel to the TAR in 2021. Foreign journalists were allowed to travel to the TAR on PRC government-organized press tours. The tours were by invitation only, allowing PRC officials to select specific journalists. Those who were selected were closely watched and prevented from visiting locations or meeting people other than those presented by PRC officials hosting the tour. In May 2021, the PRC State Council Information Office organized a highly-scripted trip to the TAR for journalists from AP, Reuters, AFP, Tokyo Radio, and Russia Today to cover the commemoration of the PRC's 70th anniversary of the "peaceful liberation of Tibet." U.S. Embassy Beijing and the FCCC are not aware of any other reporting trips by foreign journalists to the TAR in 2021.

When U.S. journalists gained access to Tibetan areas, the PRC government further suppressed their ability to report about Tibet by intimidating and preventing its citizens from interacting with foreign press. Under social media laws implemented by the TAR government, Tibetans can be imprisoned for "inappropriate communication," particularly with foreigners. By hosting group tours, the government was able to cite increased numbers and greater access to the region while maintaining strict control over the information conveyed.

Comparison Between Levels of Access to Tibetan and Non-Tibetan Areas in Relevant Provinces

Diplomats and Other Officials

The PRC government permitted U.S. diplomats and other officials to travel to Tibetan areas outside of the TAR without submitting prior notification, though official meetings with local government, religious, and community leaders required local FAO permission as was common practice in many localities throughout China. PRC security personnel used conspicuous monitoring to intimidate those traveling to Tibetan areas outside of the TAR. Government-designated minders followed diplomats and officials, prevented them from meeting or speaking with local contacts, questioned them, and restricted their movement. Official access to monasteries in Tibetan areas of Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in Sichuan province and Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) TAP in Sichuan province remained restricted. U.S. officials who traveled to Tibetan areas outside the TAR required significant advance approval to secure official meetings with local government officials and religious leaders.

Provincial officials denied most of these requests. During visits to Tibetan areas in Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai, and Yunnan provinces, local authorities prohibited U.S. diplomats from entering certain monasteries, blocked off specific roads, prevented them from having meetings or conversations, and monitored their conversations.

Tourists

International tourists sometimes faced restrictions traveling to Tibetan areas outside the TAR. U.S. tourists reported authorities regularly denied tourist access to the TAR during periods the PRC government considered politically sensitive, such as around the Dalai Lama's birthday in July. U.S. business representatives and other U.S. citizens reported increased monitoring and harassment from security officials while traveling in Tibetan areas outside the TAR.

Journalists

Although journalists were permitted to travel to areas outside the TAR with significant Tibetan populations, they were subjected to invasive surveillance, physically blocked from certain areas, and intimidated by the government. According to the FCCC's 2021 report, one U.S. journalist was blocked from entering Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan. Other U.S. correspondents were removed from Tibetan areas of Sichuan by police and detained in Chengdu, even when covering non-sensitive stories.

Comparison of the Level of Access Between 2020 and 2021

Diplomats and Other Officials

Access to the Tibetan population of the PRC by diplomats and other officials did not improve in 2021 compared to 2020, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions in Tibetan areas of Sichuan province, while less conspicuous, were equally pervasive. Security officials quickly broke up attempts by U.S. officials to speak with locals in the TAR and in Tibetan areas of Sichuan and Qinghai provinces. These actions were consistent with the procedures of prior years, including 2019, when security officials prevented many Tibetans from attending a March lunch hosted by CG Chengdu. Tibetans who interacted with U.S. diplomats afterwards reported questioning and harassment by security officials. U.S. diplomats' cultural events and outreach to Tibetans experienced frequent government objections to content and forced changes of venue.

The Nepali ambassador to the PRC visited Lhasa, where Nepal maintains a small consulate, in September 2021. A few diplomats from other missions were approved to visit in a personal capacity in March 2021.

Journalists

The FCCC's 2020 annual report stated that six out of eight journalists who requested to report from Tibetan-inhabited areas were told by authorities that reporting was either restricted or prohibited. The 2021 FCCC report noted that none of the four foreign journalists who applied for permission to visit the TAR in 2021 were approved. In 2021, foreign correspondents continued to experience harassment while reporting in Tibetan regions of Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai, and Yunnan provinces.

Required Permits and Other Measures Impeding Freedom to Travel in Tibetan Areas

In addition to the permits and other restrictions described above, visitors who received a Tibet travel permit still faced additional access barriers once in the TAR. According to travel agents operating in the TAR, the Tibet travel permit did not allow visits to all areas. Some areas were generally closed to visitors and required an additional alien travel permit from the TAR Public Security Bureau. Tourists planning to visit certain border areas also required a military area entry permit from the Military Affairs Office and a foreign affairs permit from the TAR FAO.

The PRC government did not disclose its decision-making process for granting permission to travel to the TAR, nor did it share the names of officials involved in issuing travel permits to U.S. citizens to visit the TAR.

PRC authorities routinely assess each U.S. official request to visit the TAR on a case-by-case basis. The TAR FAO generally required a diplomatic note for any official visit, accompanied by a detailed day-by-day agenda and list of trip attendees. Once the TAR government received the request, it reportedly informed a foreign affairs leading committee, consisting of representatives at the prefectural, provincial, and central levels from the United Front Work Department, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Public Security, People's Liberation Army, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This committee reviewed the request and then instructed the TAR FAO to provide CG Chengdu or U.S. Embassy Beijing with a formal response. This process typically took at least one month.