



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

After 27 years, China must answer: Where is the Panchen Lama?

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On May 17, 1995, Chinese authorities kidnapped a 6-year-old Tibetan boy, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, just days after the Dalai Lama recognized him as the reincarnated Panchen Lama, one of Tibetan Buddhism's most important leaders.

As the 27th anniversary of that horrific crime approaches, the International Campaign for Tibet joins Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, the traditional seat of the Panchen Lama, as well as Tibetan Buddhists, Tibetans, Tibet supporters, and advocates of religious freedom and human rights, in demanding the Chinese government answer: Where is the Panchen Lama?

ICT also calls on governments, journalists and people of conscience everywhere to pressure the Chinese government to provide proof of the Panchen Lama's safety and well-being—including proof he is still alive. Although Tibetans in exile celebrated the Panchen Lama's 33rd birthday last month, neither he nor his parents have been seen in public since China abducted them in 1995.

After 27 years, China must at last free the Panchen Lama and his family, and let this vital religious leader return to his people.

China's lack of legitimacy in Tibet

China's refusal to provide information about the Panchen Lama's whereabouts is further evidence of its lack of legitimacy in Tibet.

China has illegally occupied Tibet, a historically independent country, for over 60 years. But in all that time, it has never won the hearts and minds of the Tibetan people.

The Chinese government has refused to negotiate with Tibetan leaders on a lasting agreement about Tibet's status since 2010. Chinese authorities have also refused to let the Dalai Lama—the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism and one of the most admired figures in the world—return home to Tibet in the more than six decades since they forced him into exile in 1959.

Instead, the Chinese government has cracked down severely on Tibetans' religious freedom and human rights. China's abuses in Tibet have gotten so bad that Freedom House recently declared Tibet the least-free country on Earth in a tie with South Sudan and Syria.

But China's escalating oppression will not eliminate the Tibetan people's basic desire for freedom. The only way for the Chinese government to gain legitimacy in Tibet is to return to the negotiating table.

International support

Recently, a Canadian Parliament committee unanimously advanced a motion supporting the resumption of dialogue and meaningful autonomy for Tibetans. That followed testimony to the committee by Zeekgyab

Rinpoche, the abbot of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, and Penpa Tsering, the Sikyong (President) of the Central Tibetan Administration, which provides democratic governance for Tibetans in exile.

During his testimony, the abbot said he wanted to explain “this situation in Tibet in the context of the disappearance of an eminent spiritual leader,” the Panchen Lama. He highlighted China’s denial of religious freedom, the rights of children and more.

The testimony was part of a visit to North America by Zeekgyab Rinpoche and the Sikyong, which included a reception in Washington, DC for the Panchen Lama’s 33rd birthday. While in the US capital, they also met with House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and other members of the House and Senate; Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues Uzra Zeya and Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain; local Tibetan Americans and Chinese Americans; and many others.

The State Department issued a statement on the Panchen Lama’s birthday urging China to “account for Gedhun Choekyi Nyima’s whereabouts and well-being immediately and to allow him to fully exercise his human rights and fundamental freedoms, in line with the [People’s Republic of China’s] international commitments.”

That prompted a furious response from Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Wang Wenbin, who claimed at a press conference that, “The so-called reincarnated spiritual child is just an ordinary Chinese citizen living a normal life. He and his family do not want their normal life to be disturbed by others.”

Chinese authorities offered a similar reply in 2020 when five UN human rights experts and expert bodies expressed grave concern at China’s continued refusal to disclose the Panchen Lama’s precise whereabouts and called for an independent monitor to visit him. In a written response, Chinese officials again claimed the Panchen Lama was “just an ordinary Chinese citizen,” and that he and his family had “normal lives.”

If the Panchen Lama is truly living a normal life, the Chinese government should let him say so himself, as China’s own laws guarantee him the right to do. Moreover, as the State Department indicated, China is bound by international commitments to let the Panchen Lama exercise his fundamental rights.

Dalai Lama’s succession

China’s long-term goal is to use its abduction of the Panchen Lama to interfere in the succession of the Dalai Lama. After kidnapping Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, Chinese authorities appointed another Tibetan boy, Gyaltzen Norbu, to serve in his role. However, Norbu now acts less as a religious leader and more as an unwitting mouthpiece for Beijing.

Traditionally, the Panchen Lama has played a key role in identifying the reincarnated Dalai Lama, and vice versa. The Chinese government plans to use Norbu to help install its own choice as the next Dalai Lama, who will also serve as a puppet for Beijing.

China’s outrageous plan has sparked a backlash around the world. In 2020, the US passed the bipartisan Tibetan Policy and Support Act, which, along with dramatically upgrading US support for Tibetans, made it official US policy that only the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Buddhist community can decide his succession. If any Chinese officials try to interfere in that process, the US will sanction them.

With the Dalai Lama about to turn 87, the international community must keep pressure on the Chinese government to reveal where the Panchen Lama is after 27 years and to respect his freedom as a religious leader.



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