



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Reported mass DNA collection aims to undermine Tibetan identity

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Two recent reports document a systematic DNA collection program involving Tibetans, the political objective of which can only be the undermining of Tibetan identity.

In a report published today, Sept. 13, Citizen Lab finds that China's police may have gathered between about 920,000 to 1.2 million DNA samples in the Tibet Autonomous Region over the past six years. Those figures represent one-quarter to one-third of the total population of the TAR, which spans most of western Tibet.

Human Rights Watch also released a report last week saying that Chinese authorities are systematically collecting DNA from residents of the TAR, including by taking blood from children as young as 5 without their parents' consent.

"China's mass DNA collection of Tibetans is outrageous, but it is not entirely surprising," said ICT, an advocacy group that promotes human rights and democratic freedoms for the Tibetan people. *"Since China began its illegal occupation of Tibet over 60 years ago, it has used Tibet as a laboratory for its coercive methods of social control, including constant mass surveillance, the stationing of Communist Party cadres inside Buddhist monasteries and efforts to force Tibetans to spy on their own neighbors."*

"Such an intrusive system is part of the Chinese government's approach in which it recognizes no limits to its authority, imposes a climate of fear and seeks to regulate every aspect of public and private life. The end goal is not simply to bring Tibetans to heel but to undermine their unique identity altogether so that their right to determine their own destiny will no longer matter."

"In response to China's continuing violations of human rights and international law, the International Campaign for Tibet calls on Congress to pass the bipartisan Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act, which will recognize Tibetans' right to self-determination and pressure China to resume negotiations with envoys of the Dalai Lama on a peaceful settlement for Tibet's future."

DNA collection

In its report, Citizen Lab says the DNA collection program is unrelated to criminal justice. "[O]ur analysis indicates that for years police across Tibet have collected DNA samples from men, women, and children, none of whom appear to be criminal suspects," Citizen Lab says.

Police are also not targeting specific groups like activists or government critics. Instead, they are collecting DNA from entire communities.

Similarly, Human Rights Watch says in its report that, "There is no publicly available evidence suggesting people can decline to participate" in the DNA collection, "or that police have credible evidence of criminal conduct that might warrant such collection."

Some of Human Rights Watch's most disturbing findings involve blood collection from children. That includes the taking of blood from kindergarten students in Tibet's capital of Lhasa, and the collection of DNA from all boys ages 5 and older in a Tibetan township of Qinghai province.

Historical context

According to Citizen Lab, the mass police-led DNA collection program in the TAR began in June 2016 during the final months of Chen Quanguo's tenure as Chinese Communist Party Secretary of the TAR.

After building a system of constant mass surveillance, torture and militarization in the TAR, Chen moved on to the same role in Xinjiang (which Uyghurs know as East Turkestan). There he led China's genocide of the Uyghurs.

Chen's brutality toward Uyghurs shows how China's oppression of Tibetans spreads to other groups—not just inside the People's Republic of China but increasingly outside as well as Beijing exports its surveillance technology to foreign countries.

At the same time, continuing DNA collection in the TAR shows that oppression there has not subsided since Chen's departure.

US government response

The best way to end China's abuse of the Tibetan people is through peaceful negotiations between Tibetan and Chinese leaders. The Promoting a Resolution to the Tibet-China Conflict Act will pressure China to get back to the negotiating table, which they have not done since 2010.

The bill—which Reps. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and Michael McCaul, R-Texas, introduced in July 2022—recognizes Tibet's status as occupied under international law and supports the Tibetan people's right to self-determination.

Tibetan Americans and Tibet supporters will push for the bill's adoption during the Tibet Lobby Day in Washington, DC on Sept. 22-23.

Promoting China-Tibet dialogue is one of the main responsibilities of Uzra Zeya, the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, who tweeted recently that she was “[d]eeply disturbed by recent reports documenting involuntary, mass DNA collection throughout Tibet, including from children as young as 5 years old.

“We call on the PRC to stop these repressive policies and respect the fundamental freedoms of Tibetans,” tweeted Zeya, who is an Under Secretary of State.

Earlier today, the Congressional-Executive Commission on China held a hearing on “Control of Religion in China through Digital Authoritarianism.” Emile Dirks, a postdoctoral fellow at Citizen Lab, testified at the hearing about the DNA collection program.

In response to a question about what the US can do to ensure American companies are not complicit in China's efforts, Dirks suggested examining “public procurement documents to ensure that materials produced by companies outside of China are not being used in mass DNA collection programs.”

At least one American company is known to be supplying DNA profiling kits to police in the TAR. The Intercept this morning reported that Massachusetts-based Thermo Fisher struck a deal last month to supply \$160,000 worth of DNA kits to the police in the TAR. Procurement documents published on Chinese government websites also reveal that police in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, spent \$173,000 in October 2021 to upgrade to Thermo Fisher's 3500 Genetic Analyzer line. Police in the Tibet Autonomous Region also seemingly purchased Thermo Fisher equipment in August 2021.



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