



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

State Department panel highlights water security in Tibet, Himalayas

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Lobsang Yangtso had been to UN climate conferences and other water conferences before. But last week's panel on water security in the Himalayas was different in one key way: the participants were willing to discuss Tibet.

"In the other conferences that I have participated in earlier, when we talked about water security in the Himalayas, none of these countries or the speakers dared to speak what is happening in the upstream of all the Himalayan regions" in Tibet, said Lobsang, a senior researcher at the International Tibet Network. "So I'm really glad right now that we are discussing this," she added.

The panel, "Addressing Water Security Challenges in the Himalayan Region," took place Aug. 24 at the World Water Week Conference in Stockholm.

The US State Department convened the panel in partnership with the International Water Management Institute.

In addition to Lobsang, the panel featured fellow Tibetan exile Tsechu Dolma, founder of the Mountain Resiliency Project, as well as Manohara Khadka, the water management institute's Nepal country representative.

US and Indian officials also gave remarks during the discussion.

"A central theme of World Water Week was the necessity of using water for peace. In Tibet, the People's Republic of China is miles away from this goal," said Franz Matzner, government relations director of the International Campaign for Tibet, which cosponsored the event. "Cooperation is not abstract, it's a choice. All around the globe countries are working together to better manage growing water scarcity and the natural disasters that climate change is already making dangerously commonplace. It is time for China to join in choosing peace over its agenda of authoritarian control."

Himalayan water security

The Himalayan region is home to one-fifth of the world's freshwater supply. Glacial runoff forms rivers in almost every country across South and Southeast Asia, with an estimated 1.8 billion people dependent on this water's healthy, unimpeded flow.

The [integrity of Tibet's ecology](#) is critical to the Tibetan people's way of life and directly contributes to the stability and economic wellbeing of downstream countries in South and Southeast Asia.

However, large-scale water diversion projects and hydropower development are having dramatic downstream consequences, including lack of access to freshwater, economic disruption and negative impacts on downstream ecosystems.

US and India

The panel in Stockholm began with remarks from US Under Secretary of State Uzra Zeya, who delivered an introduction by video.

Zeya, who also serves as the US Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues, warned that the Chinese government—which has [illegally occupied Tibet for over 60 years](#)—has dramatically increased large-scale water diversion projects and hydropower development across the Tibetan Plateau in recent years.

“These policies have been designed and implemented without input from the 6 million Tibetans in China, leading to the displacement of traditional Tibetan communities,” she said. “These projects have also had negative implications for the water security of downstream nations.”

Rebecca Peters, a water policy advisor to the State Department, addressed the panel next. She said the rapid development of large-scale infrastructure in Tibet has compounded the effects of climate change and growing demands for water.

“As an example,” she said, “proposed diversions of billions of cubic meters of water from the [Tibetan] Plateau further into China with little to no consultation risks further undermining water security in the region.”

Peters said the US is committed to supporting a collaborative approach in the Himalayas, noting that the [Tibetan Policy and Support Act of 2020](#) “calls for increased collaboration, transparency and information sharing between the People’s Republic of China, Himalayan and other downstream nations, as well as the Tibetan community.”

The panel also featured remarks by Asok Kumar, the director general of the National Mission for Clean Ganga, Ministry of Jal Shakti, government of India.

Kumar’s remarks touched on the significance of the Himalayan water supply to downstream countries. He noted that the Ganga or Ganges river, which provides a basin for about 40% of India’s population, originates in the Himalayas.

“Hence we are also very much concerned about the environmental set up in the Himalayan regions,” Kumar said.

Panel

During the panel, the three panelists spoke about the challenges of environmental sustainability and climate change on the “Third Pole,” as the Himalayan region is known.

Tsechu of the Mountain Resiliency Project said the Chinese government has been using water in the region in an adversarial way.

“With water as a transboundary issue, cooperation, collaboration, that’s the only way you can ensure a sustainable future for all,” she said. “But when you’re using it as a tool of assertion of dominance and power and control, then you’re going to create a lot of adverse relationships with downstream communities.”

Lobsang of the International Tibet Network pointed out that UN experts criticized the Chinese government this month for [sentencing nine Tibetan environmental defenders to up to 11 years in prison](#).

“With the case of Tibet,” she said, “when you raise concerns or raise issues against the government policy, you end up in jail.”

Lobsang added that more panels like this one are needed.

“I feel that we need more platforms to have an open and clear discussion among ourselves,” she said, “so that we can put pressure on the Chinese government and make them accountable for what is happening in the environment, not only in the Himalayas but to other countries as well.”

A white paper from the panel is expected.

[Watch the panel.](#)



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