



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Calls for freedom on Panchen Lama's 35th birthday

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As the Panchen Lama spent a milestone birthday in captivity last week, supporters around the globe called on China's government to finally free the Tibetan Buddhist leader.

“On the occasion of the 35th birthday of the 11th Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima of Tibet, we call on the Chinese authorities for his immediate release along with his family, teacher and other Tibetan political prisoners,” Els Van Hoof and Samuel Cogolati, chair and deputy chair of the external affairs committee of [Belgium's Federal Parliament](#), said in one of several statements by global officials last week.

The Panchen Lama, one of Tibetan Buddhism's most important leaders, [turned 35 on April 25, 2024](#).

Born in Chinese-occupied Tibet, he was recognized by the Dalai Lama as the reincarnation of the previous Panchen Lama at age 6. Just three days later, the Chinese government abducted him and his family. The Panchen Lama has not been seen since.

The Panchen Lama's birthday last week was “a day of great importance to be observed with celebrations by all the Tibetan people, both inside and outside Tibet,” the [Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile](#) said in a statement.

“However, this day has also become one of great sadness for the people of Tibet, as it has been decades since we last saw him or heard his teachings.”

US leaders

In the United States, several officials spoke up for the Panchen Lama as he turned 35.

“Today marks Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima's 35th birthday,” [Under Secretary of State Uzra Zeya](#), who serves as the US special coordinator for Tibetan issues, said on Twitter/X. “On this day, [the United States] renews our calls for the [People's Republic of China] to immediately provide proof of his whereabouts & well-being and reaffirms our support for Tibetans to select, educate, and venerate their religious leaders free of government interference.”

“The PRC should provide the location and status of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama, who turns 35 today,” added [US Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain](#). “Like members of all religious and spiritual groups, Tibetan Buddhists should be able to select, educate, and venerate their leaders, free from interference.”

Members of the US Congress also spoke up for the Panchen Lama on his birthday.

[Rep. Chris Smith, R-NJ, and Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Wash., chair and co-chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China](#), called for “confirmation of his whereabouts and safety, immediate

release for him and his parents, and an end to PRC interference in the religious traditions of #Tibetan Buddhism.”

The [Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice](#), which carries on the legacy of late Congressman Tom Lantos, tweeted: “Holding a spiritual leader as a political prisoner for decades does not erase his position, nor does it lessen his deep connection to his people. On the occasion of his birthday, our wish is to finally get an answer to the question #WhereisthePanchenLama?”

Other US officials also raised their voice for the Panchen Lama.

[David Curry, a commissioner of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom](#), said: “Today is the Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima’s 35th birthday, and still no proof of his whereabouts. Nearly 30 years have passed since Chinese authorities abducted him & his family.”

Curry added that Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken “must demand answers.”

[Nury Turkel, the commission’s chair](#), said: “The #CCP brutally suppresses Tibetan Buddhists, including interfering in the succession process of the Dalai Lama & other religious leaders—a right that belongs to the Tibetan Buddhist community alone.”

Free Asia, a [State Department spokesperson](#) said, “We are saddened that the PRC continues to separate the Panchen Lama from his community and deny him his rightful place as a Tibetan Buddhist leader.”

Around the globe

Alongside Van Hoof and Cogolati, the two Belgian parliamentarians, several officials around the globe raised the Panchen Lama’s disappearance on his birthday.

[Germany’s Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion Frank Schwabe](#) tweeted that China’s kidnapping of the Panchen Lama was “an act of enforced disappearance.”

“I urge the Government of China to disclose precisely his whereabouts, to allow an independent monitor to visit him + to ensure that Tibetan Buddhists are able to freely practice their religion, traditions + culture without interference according to international human rights law,” Schwabe added.

[A delegation from Estonia’s parliament](#) traveled to Dharamsala, India—the exile capital of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people—for the Panchen Lama’s birthday.

The delegation members held a press conference where they called for the Panchen Lama’s release and expressed unwavering support for Tibet, [which China has brutally occupied for over 65 years](#).

Juku-Kalle Raid, a member of the delegation, said after meeting the Dalai Lama: “As His Holiness [the Dalai Lama] mentioned today, the issue at hand is not just about the Panchen Lama; it is a global matter involving unlawful acts, forced occupation, and the violations of human rights. We are committed to raising awareness on these issues in the European Parliament.”

Tibetan leaders

In Dharamsala, the [Central Tibetan Administration](#), which provides democratic governance for Tibetan exiles around the globe, led a celebration of the Panchen Lama’s birthday at the Tsuglagkhang temple.

Along with the Estonian delegation, Buddhist officials, Tibetan leaders and others took part in the events.

The [abbot of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery](#), the traditional home of the Panchen Lama, implored all Tibetans to pool their efforts in advocating for the Panchen Lama's release.

Zeekyab Rinpoche, the abbot, earlier joined other Buddhist leaders from the Himalayas to release a five-point appeal for the Panchen Lama to foreign governments, the United Nations and the international community.

[Khenpo Sonam Tenphel, speaker of the Tibetan Parliament-in-Exile](#), said on Twitter/X: "For 29 years, [the Panchen Lama's] whereabouts remain unknown. I urge governments and the international community to advocate for his release. #FreePanchenLama."

The [Tibetan Sikyong \(President\) Penpa Tsering](#) tweeted: "On the occasion of the 35th birthday of the 11th #PanchenRinpoche, Tenzin Gendun Yeshe Thinley Phuntsok, we pray that Rinpoche may soon be able to break the shackles of Chinese government's illegal captivity and assume his rightful throne of the Tashi Lhunpo Monastery."



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