



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Guidelines for official visits to Tibet

INTRODUCTION

Human rights violations in Tibet continue to **intensify**. Thus, it is imperative that official visits fully consider the People's Republic of China's (PRC) actions as part of each mission, regardless of its stated purpose. Too often human rights are not integrated into planning, on the ground activities, or pre and post visit communications. Doing so risks explicitly or implicitly sanctioning the PRC's severe and unjust treatment of the Tibetan people. While visits to Tibet represent an opportunity to address human rights concerns, they may, if executed in disregard of their inherent challenges, exacerbate an already tremendously problematic political and human rights situation. As an absolute minimum, **visits to Tibet must not create harm**.

The **“do no harm” principle**, endorsed by, e.g., the UNHCR in crisis situations, mandates that actions avoid causing unintended harm to affected populations. This approach ensures that diplomatic engagements prioritize ethical responsibility and uphold human rights. In the context of country visits to Tibet, this means, as analogy, ensuring such visits do not legitimize the PRC's human rights violations, expose local Tibetans to retaliation, or obscure the harsh realities of the region. Diplomats must carefully plan and execute visits to minimize risks, consult with human rights experts, and advocate for accountability while avoiding actions that could worsen the plight of Tibetans. If visitors cannot uphold the principle of ‘do no harm’, because of restrictions on the visit and reporting, then a visit should be reconsidered.

As access to Tibet is tightly controlled, all opportunities for official visits are welcomed. However, delegations must thoroughly **investigate and accurately report on the human rights situation in Tibet**. This is particularly critical since findings of official visits can shape international understanding of Tibet for years to come. Inaccurate or misleading assessments regarding the complexity of repression inside Tibet position the PRC to manipulate findings to invalidate or dismiss serious human rights violations.

Any country **visit to Tibet** by UN mandate-holders and official delegations **provides an opportunity and a responsibility to enhance awareness of the specific human rights violations** inflicted on the Tibetan people. For these reasons, visit agendas, actions, and statements should be conducted with sensitivity, caution, and first and foremost guided by the principle of ‘do no harm’.

Below are **key guidelines** for mandate holders and official delegations planning to **visit Tibet**. Embracing these guidelines will allow foreign officials to conduct more informed interactions, as well as more effective investigations that minimize risks to local communities and facilitate transparent diplomatic relations. Important guiding principles are also provided by the “Terms of Reference for country visits” adopted by the UN Special Procedures in June 2016. The “Terms of Reference” outline principles regarding the freedom of movement, the freedom of inquiry and regarding reprisals.

Visitors to Tibet need to be cognisant of two realities that characterise autocratic life in Tibet.

A: Tibet as an occupied and developing region where Tibetans appear to be allowed to visit monasteries, use the Tibetan language, and go about their daily lives.

The Chinese government have long presented Tibet as an underdeveloped region that only the Communist Party of China can “liberate” and “save” with its vision of Leninist-socialist economic development. While Tibetans are allowed to carry out daily religious activities and rituals, the scale of religious activities, the size of the monastic population and their movement, and children’s exposure to religious activities and the Tibetan language are all restricted to prevent mass social mobilisation or the perpetuation of a strong Tibetan identity into the next generation. The Tibetan language is virtually reduced to a local language in its homeland, and is directly and indirectly discouraged in schools, workplaces and the labour market.

B: Tibet as an occupied and suffocated society where Tibetans are granted limited space if they refrain from questioning or resisting policies that:

- monitor and restrict movement (across Tibet, China, and internationally) and expressions of opinion or thought;
- systematically and gradually marginalise Tibetan language learning and use in the education system and labour market;
- Separate over 1 million school children from their parents and deprive them of Tibetan language and cultural education;
- Present a distorted version of Tibetan history and the Tibetan-Chinese relationship;
- Curtail the traditional religious practices involving religious teachings from the Dalai Lama or going on pilgrimages to India, Nepal, etc;
- and limit the flow of information and communication across and outside Tibet.

When Tibetans speak out against any form of mistreatment or unjust practice, they are silenced through intimidation, surveillance, arbitrary arrest, torture, collective punishment, and forever blacklisted.

KEY FACTS

- Tibet has been a historically independent nation, and the Tibetan people possess a proven ethnic, social, cultural and religious identity.
- The PRC's assertion that Tibet has been part of China since "ancient times" has been debunked by Tibetan, Chinese, and international scholars.
- After its military annexation in 1950, the PRC artificially divided Tibet into the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), and Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and Counties within the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.
- The Chinese government attempts to aggressively shape the international discourse on Tibet, for example, by eradicating Tibetan place names, most obvious in the systematic omission of the term "Tibet" while replacing it by the Chinese term "Xizang".
- The PRC engages in transnational repression targeting the Tibetan diaspora.
- Absence of freedom of expression, legal remedy, and the right to choose their own leaders and clergy.
- Traditional Tibetan culture is tokenized and only tolerated when it serves state goals of developing the tourism industry.
- The PRC leverages Tibet's location and source of the region's major rivers to advance its hegemonic goals, destabilizing the region, and disrupting international security.

ASPIRATION OF THE TIBETAN PEOPLE

The primary objective of the Tibetan people, including the Dalai Lama and the democratically elected Central Tibetan Administration, is to resume dialogue with Chinese government leadership to resolve the ongoing conflict by identifying a mutually beneficial solution based on the Middle Way Approach, as suggested in the "Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People". Unfortunately, Beijing walked away from the negotiating table in 2010 after almost a decade of dialogue.

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Clarifying the purpose and ensuring transparency: Clearly defining the purpose of a country visit to Tibet is essential for aligning with human rights standards and maintaining focus on key objectives, such as assessing human rights or advocating for Tibetan autonomy. This clarity counters attempts by the PRC to dictate the agenda and ensures the visit remains meaningful. Diplomatic missions must also promote transparency by publicly announcing the visit's purpose and approving the agenda in advance to prevent last-minute restrictions or concealed details.

Preparation: In-depth research to identify and visit politically significant sites and interview persecuted individuals, report findings within the context of China's occupation, identify patterns of political repression, and the PRC's sophisticated tools to silence critics will ensure meaningful and fully informed interactions. Tibetan advocacy groups, and NGOs that have expertise in the region can provide valuable insights and recommend significant sites to visit and individual cases to raise.

Request unfettered access: The reality of the human rights situation can only be assessed by guaranteed access to various locations, including monasteries, schools, prisons, and local communities. If access or unrestricted interaction with local communities is denied, mandate holders and official delegations should seriously consider cancelling or postponing the visit, and in that event, also consider publicly explicating their decision.

Ensure linguistic independence: Diplomats should bring their trusted interpreters to avoid relying solely on government-provided translators, who may present biased interpretations or omit critical details.

Seek input from Tibetan exile communities: The Tibetan diaspora, including political leaders (such as the Central Tibetan Administration) and cultural figures, can offer an alternative perspective on the situation within Tibet.

. DURING THE COUNTRY VISIT

Mandate holders and delegations, as well as staff accompanying them, should be given the following guarantees and facilities by the Chinese Government:

- **Access to government contacts:** Ensure freedom to engage with central and local authorities across all branches of government. This is essential to gather perspectives on the human rights situation and to address pertinent issues with responsible officials and stakeholders.
- **Private contacts with civil society:** Maintain the right to private, unsupervised meetings with representatives of civil society, including NGOs, media representatives, and other independent institutions. These contacts will provide alternative viewpoints to government narratives. If no independent civil society groups exist, this should be noted in the report findings, as this is a measure of genuine freedom of speech and thought.
- **Confidential witness interactions:** Secure the ability to hold confidential and unsupervised meetings with witnesses, including individuals deprived of their liberty, such as political prisoners. These meetings are crucial to gain an unfiltered understanding of human rights violations. Be aware that political prisoners are coerced into silence as cooperation with government authorities is rewarded with improved prison conditions, reduced sentences, and no collective punishment.

- **Access to detention facilities:** Demand unrestricted access to prisons, detention centers, and places of interrogation as necessary. This access is vital to assess the conditions faced by detainees and investigate reports of arbitrary detention or mistreatment.
- **Review of documentary materials:** Ensure full access to relevant documents and records. This includes legal documents, reports, and other materials that are necessary to assess whether human rights standards are being upheld.

CHINESE GOVERNMENT CONTROL

- **Expect surveillance:** Chinese authorities will likely monitor diplomats' movements, interactions, and communications. Assume hotel rooms and personal devices are under surveillance.
- **Pay attention to the security check posts:** Located throughout Tibet and note the number of times you are asked for your identity documents when travelling. If your organized visit does not require regular ID checks, your delegation may have received prior approval. We recommend consulting other low-profile visitors on their experience.
- **Be aware of restrictions on media and NGOs:** Independent journalists and NGOs have limited access to Tibet, meaning reliable external reporting is sparse. Rely on verified information but be cautious about reports aligned with state-run media or Chinese-backed entities.

ENGAGE WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES WITH SENSITIVITY

- **Understand the cultural context:** Tibet is home to a unique culture and religion (Tibetan Buddhism), and these are sensitive issues for the local population.
- **Acknowledge language and cultural barriers to communication:** Tibetans often feel more comfortable and safer when speaking in Tibetan. In addition, different regions of Tibet have distinct Tibetan dialects. To facilitate communication, ensure you have an interpreter who can communicate in the local dialect, as well as Mandarin Chinese.
- **Limit interactions in public:** Tibetans may be intimidated or face consequences for speaking with mandate holders and delegations. To avoid putting them in danger, limit open discussions, especially on political or human rights issues.

- **Critically assess development projects and policies:** Most likely the PRC will claim economic “advances” in Tibet. In fact, the majority of projects do not benefit local Tibetans and merely serve state interests e.g., mass migration of Han Chinese workers, displacement of local communities, and economic prosperity out Tibet.

POST VISIT

- **Ensure confidentiality:** If Tibetans inside Tibet provide information about human rights abuses, ensure their anonymity is protected to avoid retaliation. Diplomatic reports should not include names or identifiable details without consent.
- **Consulting experts and civil society groups:** Seek out input, including representatives of the Tibetan community in diaspora, e.g, the Central Tibetan Administration, to interpret the visit and experiences in the context of broader political landscape.
- **Clearly report on any restrictions during the visit,** including accessing sites, meeting individuals, obtaining information, or general surveillance and control.
- **Formulating recommendations:** Develop recommendations that are practical, actionable, and designed to facilitate both implementation and monitoring.
- **Focus on China's International legal obligations:** Assessments should put a strong focus on international legal principles and obligations of the Chinese government.
- **Undertaking follow-up initiatives:** Engage in follow-up efforts, such as maintaining communication and conducting further visits, to track progress and ensure accountability.
- **Cooperate with relevant partners:** Collaborate with stakeholders, including international organizations, governments, and NGOs, to support the implementation of recommendations and long-term improvements.
- **Communicate publicly on the findings of the visit:** The absence of frank and transparent reporting (particularly on the obstacles and limits put in place by the Chinese government) risks transforming the visit into a symbolic gesture and obviating its effectiveness in advancing human rights. This communication should be made in the Chinese, English, and Tibetan language.

GEOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Tibet is comprised of the three main regions of Amdo (northeastern Tibet), Kham (eastern Tibet) and U-Tsang (central and western Tibet). After the Chinese Communist Party annexation of Tibet, completed in 1951, Tibet was artificially segmented into different political autonomous regions. The Tibet Autonomous

Region was established by the Chinese government in 1965 and covers the area of Tibet west of the Yangtse River (Tibetan: Driчу), including part of Kham, although it is often referred to now as ‘central Tibet’ in English. The rest of Amdo and Kham have been incorporated into provinces of the People’s Republic of China, where they were designated as Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures and Tibetan Autonomous Counties. As a result, most of Qinghai and parts of Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces are designated by the Chinese authorities as ‘Tibetan’. ICT uses the term ‘Tibet’ to refer to all of these Tibetan areas currently under the illegal occupation of the People’s Republic of China.

