

Statement by Dr. Gyal Lo, Tibet Action Institute, at a side-event during the 59th session of the UN Human Rights Council, organized by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 27 June 2025.

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Tashi Delek. It is an honour to speak with you today.

For my generation, and for generations of Tibetans before and after mine, His Holiness the Dalai Lama is not only our spiritual leader, but he is the living symbol of the Tibetan nation.

He is the link to our history – to an independent Tibet where Tibetans lived in freedom and as masters of our own destiny – and to our ancient Tibetan culture and identity with more than four thousand years of civilization.

He is also the embodiment of Tibetans hope for a brighter future – to a time when Tibet will be free from colonial rule.

While it is forbidden to display his photograph, or to listen to his teachings, and despite countless people being imprisoned, tortured and even killed for peacefully expressing their loyalty to him, Tibetans continue to risk everything to preserve their connection to him.

I have seen this with my own eyes growing up in Tibet.

From the cities to the most remote villages, in nomad tents on the high grasslands, in hidden corners of monasteries, Tibetans from every walk of life secretly keep images of His Holiness him - the living manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion and the patron saint of Tibet.

They recite prayers for his long life, they pass his teachings by word of mouth, they seek any and all information about him, his travels and his well-being, and they celebrate every single honor bestowed on him by world governments and institutions, and, of course, every year, on his birthday.

For Tibetans, the Dalai Lama is both our protector and our guiding star.

With no weapons, no army, and no true material wealth, he has stood up to the might of one of the most powerful regimes on the planet.

Living the life of a simple monk, and also that of a refugee, he has used the power of his intelligence, his wit and his compassion, to build a global movement of support for the Tibetan struggle for human rights and freedom.

And through his teachings of nonviolence, tolerance and loving kindness, he has done what the Chinese government has utterly failed to do – to inspire genuine admiration and respect from millions of people, of all faiths and every background.

It is this unmatched moral authority alongside the unwavering loyalty of the Tibetan people to him, that makes the Chinese Community Party determined to control his future reincarnation.

And on this, let me be absolutely clear: an atheist government, which has spent seven decades destroying monasteries, imprisoning monks and nuns, and criminalizing our faith, has neither the right nor the legitimacy to interfere in a sacred religious tradition rooted in a belief they openly reject.

The system of reincarnation is a uniquely Tibetan Buddhist practice, based on the doctrine of rebirth. The Chinese Communist Party neither understands this tradition nor believes in it.

As His Holiness himself has said, only he and those he entrusts have the authority to determine the process of his succession. This is a religious freedom issue of utmost importance.

We have already seen what happens when China interferes. In 1995, the Panchen Lama, recognized by His Holiness, was abducted and disappeared. China installed their own figure, by force.

The fake Panchen Lama is a puppet of Beijing. Every Tibetan knows it and wholeheartedly rejects him.

It is only by force and coercion that Chinese government officials can get Tibetans to kneel before the fake Panchen Lama.

And even then – even when the government offers payments to attend his teachings — people refuse to go or they find creative ways of noncompliance.

Last year, for example, when Tibetans were ordered to receive the fake Panchen Lama and show their respect to him, people set out - walking. They could have taken cars, horses, or other forms of transportation, but instead, they walked, very slowly on purpose. And, after three hours on the road, they arrived late, after his speech and ceremonies were over.

This was no accident.

You see, Tibetan Buddhist faith endures across all 2.5 million square kilometers of the Tibetan plateau.

In 2023, near my home village in eastern Tibet, hundreds of thousands of Tibetans gathered for a special Buddhist teaching given by a revered Tibetan lama.

It was a remarkable display of unity, devotion, and defiance in the face of tight state control. One that Party officials tried, and failed, to stop from happening for fear of sparking a mass incident.

But while Tibetan Buddhist faith remains strong, an existential threat is looming. This is due to the fact that 1 million children, representing at least 3 out of every 4 students between ages 6-18, have been forced into colonial-style boarding schools where they live the majority of their childhoods separated from their families, culture and religion.

As an educational sociologist with three decades of experience working in Tibet, I can assure you – these so-called schools are not about education – they are in fact about indoctrination – and the Chinese government's aim is clear: to raise a new generation without knowledge of our language, culture or faith, and therefore without the deep love and loyalty for His Holiness the Dalai Lama that has been passed down for centuries.

The Chinese government's bid to control the future reincarnation of the Dalai Lama must be seen alongside its bid to control the lives of an entire generation of Tibetan children through the colonial boarding school system.

They are two sides of the same coin—two halves of a single plan — one aiming to consolidate China's rule in Tibet, once and for all, by erasing the cultural and spiritual continuity of the Tibetan people.

It is absolutely critical for States to speak out against and thwart this plan now, before it gets too late. They can do this by:

- Issuing - and repeating - an unequivocal statement that the Dalai Lama's succession is a decision that will and must be made only by the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan people, and that openly rejects China's plan to interfere in this religious process.
- Sanctioning any Chinese leader or official who might attempt to interfere in this religious process.
- Calling for the immediate abolition of the coercive "state-run boarding school system imposed on Tibetan children" as recommended by UN Special Procedures, the UN Committee on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.

The institution of the Dalai Lama, which is nearly 630 years old, has outlasted dynasties and empires. I believe it will outlive the Chinese Community Party as well.

But for that to happen, we need solidarity, moral courage, and meaningful action from governments and institutions like those gathered here today.

The faith of the Tibetan people is strong. Our spirit is unbroken.

I can say with certainty, as someone who came recently from Tibet: the future belongs to us - a people who believe in and share global values of democracy and respect for the fundamental rights and freedoms of all people.

It does not belong to those who seek to erase us and to undermine these precious values.

Please help us fight for what we all know is right.

Thank you.

ENDS