

Statement by Tencho Gyatso, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, 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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Thank you. I would like to thank the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights for organizing this important event today here at the United Nations.

Tibetans, followers of Tibetan Buddhism, and supporters of the Dalai Lama are preparing to celebrate the 90th birthday of their revered spiritual leader. His Holiness will turn 90 on July 6, in nine days. This is a tremendous cause for celebration. Of a life committed to peace, to dialogue and to justice.

At the same time, the Chinese government continues to vilify His Holiness and persecutes Tibetans in Tibet who show reverence to him, in public and in private. I am particularly grateful to the European Union for its recent statement on occasion of the 40th EU-China Human Rights Dialogue highlighting the sentencing of the Tibetan monks Drugdra, Lobsang Gephel and Lobsang Khedrup - who have been jailed for showing reverence to their spiritual leader.

Notably, the European Union also stated - I quote - "that the selection of religious leaders should happen without government interference and in accordance with religious norms, including for the succession of the Dalai Lama." The EU touched upon the important question of the appointment of Tibetan Buddhist leaders in Tibet and the succession of the Dalai Lama.

Please allow me to contextualise this important statement.

When a Dalai Lama passes away, it is Tibetan Buddhist tradition to search for a reincarnation, recognize and educate the child to enable it to continue the work of its predecessor. The question of where and how he will be reincarnated has become a Chinese propaganda flash point. Historically, the Dalai Lama has most often been identified within Tibet. However, one Dalai Lama has been found in Mongolia in the 16th century and one in an area that falls in present day India, in the 17th century.

For 70 years the 14th Dalai Lama has worked to protect the Tibetan people's wellbeing, culture, language and identity under difficult geopolitical conditions that threaten the very continuity of the Tibetan civilization. Recognizing the many challenges facing Tibetans and the need for resilient, self-sustaining democratic governance, the Dalai Lama decided to transfer his political responsibilities to a democratically elected leadership in 2011, reflecting a careful adaptation of Tibetan practices and institutions to better serve the Tibetan people in the modern era.

Acknowledging the increasing interest in his reincarnation, the Dalai Lama consistently conveys that the future of the Dalai Lama lineage will be decided after consultation with Tibetan Buddhist followers, the Tibetan people, leaders of the Tibetan Buddhist schools, and self-reflection. For example, following a meeting of the leaders of the main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama issued a statement on 24 September 2011, titled "On the issue of his reincarnation".

Summarized, the document's message is that only the Dalai Lama, or the authorities and managers of his lineage (the Ganden Phodrang Trust) can determine the identity of the next Dalai Lama or the method of selection. No other person or entity, including the Chinese government, has any right to interfere in that decision. The statement also lays out potential selection procedures that may be used to identify a

successor. This includes the option of the recognition of an "emanation", which refers to the appointment of a living person prior to the predecessor's death.

In 2025, the Dalai Lama reasserted in his most recent book, "Voice for the Voiceless": "In the official statement I issued in 2011, I also pointed out that it is totally inappropriate for Chinese Communists, who explicitly reject religion, including the idea of past and future lives, to meddle in the system of reincarnation of lamas, let alone that of the Dalai Lama. Such meddling, I pointed out, contradicts their own political ideology and only reveals their double standards. [...] In summing up my thoughts on the question of the reincarnation of the Dalai Lama in that 2011 official statement, I urged that unless the recognition of the next Dalai Lama is done through traditional Tibetan Buddhist methods, no acceptance should be given by the Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhists across the world to a candidate chosen for political ends by anyone, including those in the People's Republic of China. Now, since the purpose of a reincarnation is to carry on the work of the predecessor, the new Dalai Lama will be born in the free world so that the traditional mission of the Dalai Lama – that is to be the voice for universal compassion, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, and the symbol of Tibet embodying the aspirations of the Tibetan people – will continue".

The Dalai Lama remains the heart of the Tibetan nation, and the nations and peoples across the Himalaya and beyond. He is revered by Tibetans and represents the Tibetan people's religious and cultural identity, and its future, now under serious threat. Intervention in the reincarnation process – and therefore succession – of senior lamas, and especially the Dalai Lama, represents an attack on Tibetan identity, agency and hope.

The Chinese Communist Party's claim to control the succession of the Dalai Lama, as it repeatedly does, lays bare the acute absence of legitimacy of its rule over the Tibetan people. The Party goes to great lengths to deploy disinformation and outright suppression to advance an image of legitimacy. This reveals that the Communist Party itself is very much aware of its failure to build support among the Tibetan people.

The international community, UN bodies, states, parliaments and the general public should clearly reject Chinese government interference into the succession of the Dalai Lama. To protect freedom of religion, to protect the cultural rights of Tibetans and the rights of the Tibetan people as a whole.

I understand my esteemed colleagues on the panel will elaborate further on the cultural significance and the legal and human rights dimension of the issue.

I thank you.

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