

**World's most famous Buddhist on the blacklist  
of atheist China's first international Buddhist forum  
- and -  
Briefing on the reality of religious repression in Tibet**

**ICT Press Release, April 13 2006**

The World Buddhist Forum, the first major international Buddhist gathering hosted by the atheist Chinese government, was addressed today by an uncomfortable-looking teenage boy accorded the status of Panchen Lama by Beijing for political reasons, but not recognised as a religious figure by Tibetans. The Tibetan leader, the Dalai Lama, the world's most well-known Buddhist who is respected globally for his moral and religious authority, was not invited to the Forum.

Mary Beth Markey, Executive Director of ICT, said: "This 'religious forum' looks more like a session of the Party Congress except that the participants standing in perfect formation are wearing maroon and saffron robes. And it's shameful that Beijing has scripted Gyaltsen Norbu, already considered by Tibetans as the 'fake Panchen', with statements that are clearly untrue about religious freedom in China."

Gyaltsen Norbu, the teenager installed by China as Tibet's 11th Panchen Lama, joined eight Buddhist leaders from South Korea, Taiwan and Sri Lanka onstage at the conference in the eastern city of Hangzhou today. He told the forum that Chinese society provides a favorable environment for Buddhist belief. The boy recognised by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama, Gendun Choekyi Nyima, was taken into custody in 1995 with his parents and his current whereabouts is not known.

"The Chinese authorities misused an opportunity to set aside their paranoia and rhetoric about the Dalai Lama and implement the forum's motto, 'a harmonious world begins in the mind'," said Mary-Beth Markey. 'Beijing clearly hopes to convey a message of religious tolerance on the eve of Hu Jintao's US visit, where he will meet a US President who is particularly interested in the issue of religious freedom."

Hundreds of monks and scholars from all over the world are visiting Hangzhou in Zhejiang province for the meeting, which concludes on Sunday. China said it did not want the Dalai Lama to "disharmonize" the forum. Qi Xiaofei, vice-director of the state administration by religious affairs, was reported by the BBC as saying: "The Dalai Lama is not only a religious figure, but is also a long-time stubborn secessionist who has tried to split his Chinese motherland and break the unity among different ethnic groups" (April 13). The 17th Karmapa, who was being groomed as a 'patriotic' figure by China before he fled from Tibet into exile in 2000, was also not invited.

Liu Yandong, head of the United Front Work Department that is currently engaged in a dialogue process with the Dalai Lama's representatives, attended the conference today and according to Reuters, sought to play down fears that China's rise would be a threat to the world (April 13).

Footage of Gyaltsen Norbu's statement to the conference and a BBC report can be viewed at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/4905140.stm>.

## **The reality of religious repression in Tibet today**

China's Constitution states that citizens of the PRC have 'freedom of religious belief' - but the Communist Party defines what is 'acceptable' religious behavior and religion is only tolerated as long as it does not interfere with or challenge the legitimacy and status of the Party.

Tibetan Buddhism is an integral element of Tibetan identity, and is therefore often perceived as a threat to the authority of the state and unity of the PRC. Hence measures to repress religion have been harsh in Tibet.

Many Tibetans feel they have no choice but to escape into exile if they are to pursue their religious vocation, for reasons including the decimation of the older generation of senior teachers and scholars inside Tibet and the generation gap between older and younger generations due to death, exile or the absence of opportunity; the material devastation of the network of monasteries, Buddhist libraries, texts and artifacts, and pilgrimage sites; the systems in place to control and manage religious institutions; the political campaigns, obligatory political study sessions and forced denunciations of the Dalai Lama; and restrictions on pilgrimage imposed in various areas by PRC authorities.

- Over the past 50 years, practical measures to handle religion in China have varied from a pragmatic tolerance to complete repression and persecution. Current policy dictates that religion should be accommodated and utilized, but kept firmly under Party control. This has led, during the past 10 years, to the development of administrative and legal mechanisms that enable the authorities to clamp down on any religious activities viewed as a threat to social stability and national unity, while claiming they are operating according to a 'rule of law'.
- Sections of the Chinese leadership views the Dalai Lama as the main obstacle to political stability in Tibet, a 'wolf in lama's clothing.' The very practice of Buddhism and the display of a picture of the Dalai Lama have become, for many Tibetans, a means of expressing their Tibetan identity, and occasionally their dissent to the Party, as well as their loyalty to their religious leader. Hence issues relating to religion are perceived as being highly relevant to political control and the suppression of 'separatism' in Tibet - both factors underpinning China's strategic concerns and development aims in Tibetan areas of the PRC.
- A new low point has been reached in the last few years with the imprisonment of several senior religious figures known for their loyalty to the Dalai Lama and their religious and social activism - one of whom, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, is serving a life sentence.
- A wide-ranging patriotic education campaign has been carried out in monasteries and nunneries throughout Tibetan areas with the aim of undermining the Dalai Lama's influence, indoctrinating monks and nuns in Party policy and ideology and identifying defiant monks and nuns.
- Beijing is more aggressively asserting control over the search and identification of Tibetan reincarnate lamas.
- The demolitions of homes and expulsion of monks and nuns over the past five years in the religious institutes of Larung Gar (Serthar) and Yachen Gar in a Tibetan area of Sichuan province are indicative of a continued determination to enforce state-specified limitations on monastic life and control the activity of influential and charismatic spiritual leaders like the late Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, the founder of Larung Gar.

- Obtaining a complete religious education remains extremely difficult or impossible in Tibet.
- Imprisonment for terms of 5 - 10 years or more, and brutal torture continues to be a likely consequence of dissent for monks and nuns in Tibet.

**Kate Saunders**

Communications Director, ICT  
Tel: 1 202-785-1515 x 23  
Cell: 1 202 375 4389  
email: [kates@savetibet.org](mailto:kates@savetibet.org)

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**International Campaign for Tibet**

1825 Jefferson Place NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
United States of America  
Phone: 202.785.1515  
Fax: 202.785.4343  
[info@savetibet.org](mailto:info@savetibet.org)

**ICT Europe**

Keizersgracht 302  
1016EX Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265  
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266  
[icteurope@savetibet.org](mailto:icteurope@savetibet.org)

**ICT Deutschland e.V.**

Marienstr. 30  
10117 Berlin  
Germany  
Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086  
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087  
[info@savetibet.de](mailto:info@savetibet.de)

