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Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[12 May 2017]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

No improvements regarding the Human Rights Situation in the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent regions where Tibetans live

Tibetans Continue to Self-Immolate

Since 2009 to May 2017, 149 known Tibetans have self-immolated in the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent regions where Tibetans live. 126 of them died on the spot or shortly thereafter. The self-immolators continue to call for “freedom” and the “return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama”. Self-immolation protests are related to Chinese efforts to control Tibetan religious practice and culture. The Chinese authorities view these expressions of protest as criminal activities.

Labelling self-immolation as an "act of terrorism" incited by the "Dalai Clique", the Chinese authorities have issued guidelines aimed at punishing family members and relatives of Tibetan self-immolators. The guidelines bar family members of self-immolators from travelling, applying for loans and licences, employment opportunities and governmental aid.

The Chinese authorities force family of Tibetan self-immolators to sign documents stating that self-immolator set himself or herself on fire because of problems at home and not in protest against Chinese policies.

Religious Freedom in the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent regions where Tibetans live

Just a few weeks ago, a teenage Tibetan student named Chagdor Kyap from Bora Township in the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture set himself ablaze near Bora monastery in the township and was seen running towards Chinese government offices, but he fell down before reaching the offices.

The source added that the boy belonged to a farmer family and his parents were identified as Dolma Tso – the mother, and Zoepa – the father. This latest incident of self-immolation in protest of Chinese rule was followed by two similar incidents in the recent past – one in March when a 24-year-old Tibetan farmer identified as Pema Gyaltzen set himself on fire and the other in April when an unidentified Tibetan monk self-immolated him on a busy street in Western China.

Demolitions and expulsions at the Buddhist Institute of Larung Gar and Yachen Gar since July 2016 are part of an unfolding political strategy involving more aggressive measures to curb and manage the growing influence and number of monks and nuns at these important monastic centres of study and Buddhist ethics. Chinese authorities, while undermining religious practice and stepping up intrusive security measures, are using this interest in Tibetan Buddhism to attract domestic tourists, leading to fears of further diminishment of these monastic communities, popularly known as ‘encampments’ or ‘chogars’ in Tibetan. For the past year, major construction work has indeed been in progress in the valley at the foot of Larung Gar, with the apparent aim of creating a tourist centre that is likely to include Tibetan restaurants, souvenir stores, horse-riding centres, trekking, and organised visits to the now world-famous Buddhist Institute. “Monks and nuns who remain at Larung Gar have already endured distress and trauma over the demolitions and removal of monks and nuns” said a Western scholar who has visited the area recently. “Now they are frightened that this important place, known for the scholarship and serious study possible there, will be reduced to a superficial attraction for temporary visitors and spiritual seekers.”

Six UN experts made public a joint submission they had sent to the People's Republic of China in November 2016, which stated that the developments at the Buddhist institutes violate international human rights laws. They said the events "seem to be concerted attacks on tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which constitute serious violations of cultural rights of current and future generations". Concerns about the situation at Larung Gar have also been raised in a resolution of the European Parliament adopted in December 2016.

China silent on enforced disappearance of Tibet's Panchen Lama

On 17 May 2017 marks the 22nd anniversary of the enforced disappearance of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the 11th Panchen Lama of Tibet. A month earlier, Tibetans, supporters and followers of the Tibetan Buddhism all over the world have celebrated his 28th birthday.

The last information on Panchen Lama's condition became available on 6 September 2015 when Norbu Dhondup, an official from the United Front Work Department of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) responded to questions from the media that Panchen Lama was living "a normal, happy life and receiving a good cultural education" and that he "does not want to be disturbed." This brief and vague response was similar to earlier statements from Chinese leaders on the Panchen Lama. The fact is there is no evidence to corroborate this claim and is designed to deflect questions from the international community on the enforced disappearance of one of the Tibetan's most important spiritual leaders.

The continued detention of Panchen Lama in secret is an act of enforced disappearance, a "serious international crime" that violates multiple human rights and fundamental freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other major international human rights instruments. Under Chinese law, Article 34 of the constitution provides basic human rights including the right to vote and stand for election to all citizens who have reached the age of 18.

The detention of the 28-year old Panchen Lama is part of China's carefully designed policy to control and manage Tibetan religion. In the system of Tibetan Buddhism, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima would now be at an age whereby he has achieved or is undergoing with preparations for the examination of Geshe Lharampa the doctorate (Phd equivalent) in Buddhist Philosophy. This raises the question of the current status of his education in Tibetan Buddhist Philosophy. This raises serious questions which the relevant UN mandate-holders should pose to the Chinese authorities.

High Commissioner's Annual Report to 34th UNHRC Session

The UN High Commissioner's report to the Human Rights Council on 8 March 2017 once more expressed his concern about the situation in the Tibet Autonomous Region (XAR) and adjacent regions where Tibetans live. He stated: "The Government of China had stated its intention to play a leadership role in the Human Rights Council, and so far it had performed remarkably in lifting hundreds of millions of people from poverty. However, it should respect the rights of human rights defenders, and cease to restrict cultural and religious rights, particularly in Xinjiang and Tibet." It is certainly true that China has lifted hundreds of millions of people from poverty. But that does not render legitimate criticism of the human rights violations in the PRC illegitimate. Society for Threatened Peoples agrees on the High Commissioner's point regarding the respect of the rights of human rights defenders and the need to cease to restrict cultural and religious rights.

Discrimination against Ethnic Minorities in China

The United Nations human rights expert on poverty has criticized the Chinese government for exposing “ethnic minorities in China” to serious human rights challenges. In a newly published report on his country visit to China in August 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, expressed that while the plights of Tibetans and Uighurs were “deeply problematic,” “most ethnic minorities in China are exposed to serious human rights challenges, including significantly higher poverty rates, ethnic discrimination and forced relocation”.

He further challenged the Chinese government’s claim that “nationalities” in China enjoy equality as guaranteed by the Chinese constitution and criticized the “head in the sand” mentality of the Chinese department dealing with ethnic minorities, saying that – while implementing “top-down” and “one-size fits all policies” – it insisted that there had been “no resistance to its poverty alleviation projects” and “no protests”.

Peaceful Solo Protestors Detained

Tibetans continue to protest despite knowing the consequences of being caught. Most of the solo protestors were seen carrying photos of the Dalai Lama and calling for freedom. In 2016, there were 10 known cases of solo protests, and since January 2017, there were four known cases of solo protests.

On 16 March 2017, a Tibetan monk Lobsang Dahrgye staged a peaceful demonstration in the street of Ngaba town in Sichuan Province but was quickly overpowered by police and taken away.

Meanwhile, a Tibetan laywoman named Dukpe was taken into custody after launching a solo protest in Ngaba town on March 18. Before her protest, she was in charge of maintaining the grounds near a statue of the Buddha in front of Kirti monastery. So far, no one knows where she has been taken,” the source said, describing her as married and the mother of two children.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls upon the members of the United Nations Human Rights Council to urge China to:

- To end all its repressive policies leading Tibetans to resort to tragic act of self-immolation protests,
- To respect the religious freedom of Tibetans,
- To implement all the recommendations made by the UN mandate holders and treaty bodies on all issues pertaining to the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent regions where Tibetans live.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls upon the members of the United Nations Human Rights Council:

- To urge the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to take immediate action in the case of self-immolations and push for a visit to the Tibet Autonomous Region and adjacent region where Tibetans live to assess and address the pressing situation.

