



ANNUAL

REPORT

Human Rights Situation in Tibet

2023



Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) is a registered non-governmental human rights organisation established in January 1996 in Dharamsala (India) with the mission to protect the human rights of the Tibetan people in Tibet and promote the principles of democracy in the exile Tibetan community. The centre is entirely run and staffed by Tibetans in exile. TCHRD's work entails monitoring, researching, translating, and documenting human rights violations in Tibet. The centre conducts regular, systematic investigations of human rights abuses in Tibet. It brings out annual reports, thematic reports, testimonies of victims of human rights violations, electronic newsletters, and briefings on human rights issues that confront Tibetans inside Tibet. The centre engenders awareness on various issues relating to human rights and democracy through grassroots and diplomatic means, using regional and international human rights mechanisms and community-based awareness campaigns.

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Even as China ended its authoritarian zero-Covid policy in 2023, the human rights abuses in Tibet continued unabated, with Tibetans facing increased clamp down over freedom of expression and freedom of religion and belief, while Chinese authorities doubled down on its policy of forced assimilation and violated the rights of detainees.

Tibetans faced extreme restrictions in not only exercising the right to freedom of assembly but also freedom of expression and information. Online and offline, the space to peacefully express opinions or criticisms against the government's repressive laws and policies remained nonexistent. In the name of social stability and online security, all online platforms have long been brought under the direct supervision and censorship of the Chinese authorities.

The right to freedom of religion and belief faced further restrictions with the introduction of a new regulation that essentially monopolised direct state control over the establishment, management and activities of religious activity sites such as monasteries, mosques and churches. Pervasive surveillance remained the norm as more government informants were embedded in monastic institutions, in addition to an existing network of surveillance and control mechanisms to monitor the monastic population's behaviour, activities and movements. Chinese authorities continued to depopulate the monastic population by expelling monks for ostensibly breaking the law.

An increasing number of Tibetan Buddhist practices, including rituals and symbols, are being criminalised. The relaxation of zero-Covid restrictions made no difference to Tibetan Buddhists, who continued to face restrictions in undertaking religious pilgrimages. Tibetans from Amdo and Kham areas were particularly affected as government checkpoints ensured they did not reach the holy city of Lhasa, the preferred site for many Tibetan pilgrims.

Popular Tibetan religious events such as the Kalachakra Initiation ceremony and the Ganden Ngamcho festival faced forceful intervention and disruption at the hands of Chinese security forces.

There was no let-up in the campaign to censor and denounce the Tibetan spiritual leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Tibetans were detained and tortured for merely sharing pictures of His Holiness or storing them on their personal phones. Demonstrating that one has severed all connections with His Holiness is still being used as an essential condition to access various government largesse, among them being able to get a job or admission into schools or universities.

Despite numerous calls from the international community to immediately halt its forced assimilation policy, Chinese authorities imposed Chinese medium education in Tibetan schools and quietly amended local regulations in Tibetan areas to promote the so-called common national language or Mandarin Chinese in all spheres of Tibetan lives, with the intent to promote the use and development of the so-called common national language or Mandarin Chinese.

As usual, Tibetan detainees faced a range of human rights violations, from arbitrary detention to unfair sentencing and, torture and custodial death. Tibetans were detained for merely exercising fundamental human rights, such as peacefully expressing dissent or advocating for human rights. All cases documented in this report lacked access to due process or transparent legal proceedings.

Subjecting detainees to incommunicado detention in undisclosed locations for prolonged periods has become the norm in Tibet. It is little surprise then that Tibetan political prisoners, upon release, frequently struggle with poor health conditions all through their lives. Some die prematurely in police custody, while others succumb to torture injuries after their release from incarceration. Either way, these deaths are direct results of unjust and unfair imprisonment for crimes that were never committed in the first place.



II. METHODOLOGY

This report was prepared by the research section of TCHRD. TCHRD's trilingual research team, working in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, compiled and analysed information from a wide variety of sources on the human rights situation in Tibet in 2023.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, TCHRD researchers conducted mandatory verification with at least two sources for every account or testimony included in this report. The originally sourced information by TCHRD has been subjected to similar verification procedures.

Due to the risks involved, the identities of sources and informants who contributed to this report cannot be made public. The increased risks faced by Tibetans have made it impossible to collect comprehensive information on many cases documented in this report.

TCHRD recognises those with the courage to share their stories, and those who risk their lives transmitting information in pursuit of human rights in Tibet.

All research work was guided by the research ethics principle of "Do no harm", prioritising the privacy and security of sources and informants as well as their loved ones.



III. RECOMMENDATIONS

TCHRD urges individuals, governments, civil society organisations and all intergovernmental and supranational organisations, such as the United Nations and the European Union, to exert concrete pressure on the government of the People's Republic of China to:

1. Release all Tibetans deprived of their liberty for merely exercising internationally recognised human rights and fundamental freedoms.
2. Prosecute government officials or security personnel responsible for the torture, ill-treatment and custodial death of Tibetan detainees.
3. Abolish all practices of arbitrary detention, including prolonged pretrial detention and the so-called 'administrative detention' that gives discretionary power to police to detain individuals without charge or trial.
4. Review or repeal laws and regulations such as 'Measures for the Administration of Religious Activity Sites' that do not align with international human rights standards and interfere with or infringe on the right of Tibetans to practise and manifest their religious beliefs freely.
5. Guarantee the rights and duties of Tibetan parents and legal guardians to ensure that their children's education is aimed at the development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values.
6. Stop the forcible closure of private Tibetan schools and involuntary enrolment of Tibetan children into state schools without the free and informed consent of their parents and legal guardians.
7. Uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination by putting an immediate stop to unlawful practices of targeting Tibetans for their religious and political beliefs and principles.
8. Allow freedom of movement and travel to Tibetans by eliminating the checkpoint regime and abandoning the requirement for Tibetans to produce lengthy documentation to travel to Lhasa or other areas in the Tibet Autonomous Region.
9. Stop conducting political brainwashing and propaganda campaigns that have expanded in recent years to almost all spheres of Tibetan society, including educational institutions, monasteries and nunneries, professional workplaces, village and neighbourhood committees, etc.
10. Dismantle the state surveillance infrastructure that has a chilling effect on Tibetan human rights defenders, activists and critics of Chinese government policies and practices.
11. Repeal the new counter-espionage law and withdraw all other equally oppressive regulations, such as 'Administrative measures for Internet Religious Information Services' that violate the right to freedom of expression online and offline.



A trilingual (Tibetan-Chinese-English) sign above the entrance to a small cafe in Nyalam County.



IV. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

IV.1. REPRESSIVE REGULATIONS AND ANTI-DALAI LAMA CAMPAIGN

Chinese authorities continued to maintain a strong grip on online spaces by introducing a revised law on counter-espionage that came into effect on 1 July, which imposed further restrictions on the right to privacy and freedom of expression¹. An equally repressive central government directive issued in 2022 called the "Measures for Rewards for Citizens Reporting Behaviors Endangering National Security" had already laid the grounds for the revised counter-espionage law by introducing a reward mechanism for citizens reporting to the authorities about so-called acts of 'endangering national security'².

The continued implementation of nationwide campaigns to ostensibly sanitise online spaces by cracking down on the so-called Internet rumours and fake news has become a regular practice to further encroach upon the right to freedom of expression and information. For instance, the nationwide weekly campaigns conducted in April and July 2023, gave discretionary powers to the public security agencies, particularly the internet police at all levels of governance to mobilise the general public and internet companies in imposing online surveillance and censorship³.

While any content related to His Holiness the Dalai Lama is routinely and diligently censored online, an edited footage of the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader was allowed to be widely shared on the Chinese cyberspace sometime in April 2023⁴. For decades, Chinese authorities have heavily censored any content related to the Dalai Lama, to the extent that households and mobile phones are often

inspected for hidden images or portraits of the Tibetan spiritual leader.

On 10 April, a Tibetan teacher named Delek was detained and held incommunicado for two weeks for expressing joy over a photo of the Tibetan spiritual leader, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, that he saw on social media. He was later fired from his teaching job and placed under enhanced supervision⁵.

The footage mentioned above was an edited version that contained defamatory content against the Dalai Lama. But when a netizen shared the unedited version of the same video on 17 April, the person was barred from posting or sharing further content on his Douyin account⁶.

In keeping with its long-standing ban on Dalai Lama's photos, Chinese authorities on 26 October detained a Tibetan woman named Wangchuk Tso in an undisclosed location in Dronglung township in Dola (Ch: Qilian) County, Tsojang (Ch: Haibei) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, for sharing a photo of the Dalai Lama in online groups on Douyin and WeChat as well as sending messages to Tibetans living overseas⁷.

IV.2. IMPRISONMENT FOR CREATING WECHAT GROUPS

Local Tibetans were also detained and sentenced to prison for setting up online groups focussed on religious activities, such as taking part in prayer groups or raising funds for charitable projects. In October, a Tibetan woman, Semkyi Dolma from Damchukha (Ch: Damquka) Town in Damshung (Ch: Dangxiang) County, Lhasa City, was detained

and later sentenced in secret to one and a half years in prison on charges of 'leaking state secrets' when all she did was create two WeChat groups during the Covid lockdown in 2021⁸. The online groups became popular among devout Tibetans who actively used them to share information and offer prayers for those affected by the pandemic.

On 25 October, Samphel, father of three, was detained incommunicado by local police for setting up an online group on Tibetan Buddhism in Sakya (Ch: Saga) County, Shigatse City. Before detention, he was summoned to the local police station, where his phone was confiscated and subjected to a thorough search, followed by an interrogation session during which was asked about the activities of the online group. The online group in question used to conduct charitable activities such as feeding and caring for stray animals on days considered holy and auspicious in Tibetan Buddhism, such as the full moon on the 15th day of every month in the Tibetan lunar calendar⁹.

Earlier in March, police in Namling (Ch: Nánmùlín) County, Shigatse City, had similarly detained a Tibetan woman, Yangtso, providing further evidence that Tibetans using mobile phones are under close state surveillance and enjoy no privacy. Yangtso was detained on 2 March after a phone search revealed that she had contacted people overseas and sent photos¹⁰.

IV.3. CLAMPDOWN ON VIRTUAL AND PHYSICAL SPACES FOR EXPRESSION

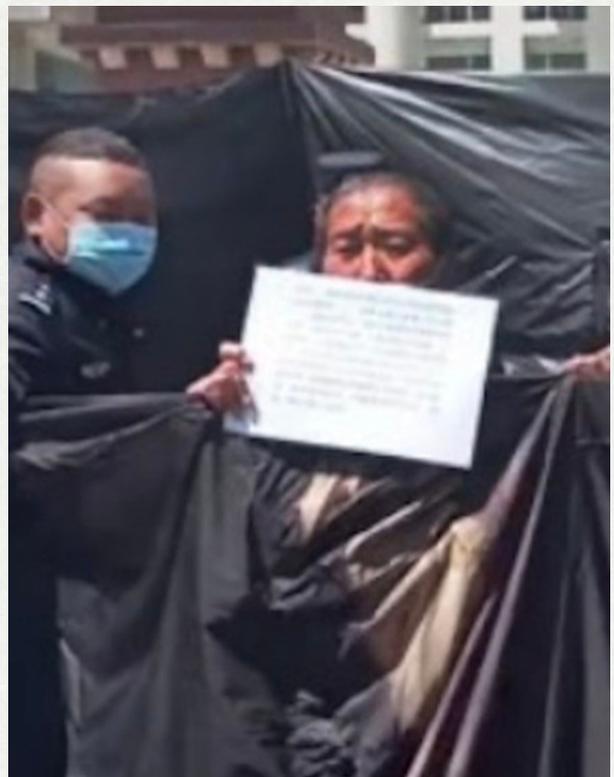
Again, in March, exiled Tibetan sources learned about the sentencing of writer and interpreter Zangkar Jamyang, 47, to a four-year prison sentence. It is believed that he was sentenced for publishing online an essay criticising China's policy on replacing Tibetan medium education with Chinese, which he termed as unlawful and in violation of the country's constitutional and other legal provisions¹¹. He published the essay on 25 May 2020 in response to a directive issued in March of that year by local authorities in Khyungchu (Ch: Hongyuan) County, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture announcing the introduction of Chinese medium education in Tibetan schools across the county. He was detained on 4 June and held in an undisclosed location until his sentencing.

While online spaces have remained under heavy restrictions, local Tibetans have for years found it nearly impossible to express their views through public protest and demonstration.



Zangkar Jamyang, undated. Photo: Tibet Times

In this regard, the series of public protests staged by Gonpo Kyi, sister of imprisoned entrepreneur Dorje Tashi, have sparked widespread attention and inspiration. By resorting to both virtual and physical spaces, she carried out relentless public protests calling for the release of her brother from wrongful life imprisonment¹². Throughout March, April and May 2023, Kyi posted shared videos online decrying the false verdict against Dorje Tashi and also staged protests outside police stations and the high court in Lhasa City despite being subjected to detention, beatings, and repeated warnings from the authorities¹³. Her husband and her other brother, Dorje Tseten, were also involved in the protests for which they were subjected to detention and beatings at the hands of the police.



Screengrab of Gonpo Kyi's peaceful protest for her brother's fair trial. Photo: TCHRD



Photo: RFA



V. EDUCATIONAL AND LANGUAGE RIGHTS

V.1. IMPOSITION OF CHINESE MEDIUM EDUCATION

This year, Tibetan medium education was replaced with Chinese medium education, also known as Model 2 education policy, in primary and middle schools across Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, including the Tsaruma Tibetan primary school in Kakhog (Ch: Hongyuan) County¹⁴.

In 2020, local authorities in Ngaba scrapped the plan to introduce the Model 2 policy after facing widespread criticisms from local Tibetans, including teachers, parents, students and educators who engaged in online discussions and published open letters and petitions urging local Chinese authorities to scrap the plan. At the time, an online poll saw 97 percent of 28000 people in Ngaba voting in favour of the Tibetan medium education or Model 1 over Model 2 or Chinese medium education.

Among the prominent critics of the Model 2 policy was the well-known Tibetan writer and public intellectual Thupten Lodoe (Pseudonym: Sabuchey), who wrote an open letter on the issue for which he would later be arrested. The letter was published online in April 2020, more than a year before his detention and subsequent imprisonment to a four years and six-month term.

Sabuchey's letter exposed the Chinese Communist Party's "sinicization" ideology of Han Chinese superiority, which views all non-Chinese peoples as barbarians and uncivilised. An excerpt from the letter reads as follows:

“

Such destruction of old cultural traditions occurred during the waning years of the Qing dynasty. In this way, the unalterable and irreversible commands of the emperor became “an ideal political system”. Viewed from this background, minority language, script, and education have all become criminal. It needs no mentioning that if the Tibetan language is prioritised, there will be a system different from the one based on the Sinicization ideology. Considering the struggle to establish a unified system through the Hua and Yi distinction, to protest the Sinicization system is to protest the nation. This is what we must uncover and expose! We need to abandon this old thinking and concept. If this “background concept” is not broken, minority cultures and languages will not get the basic conditions to survive, let alone hold their rightful space.

”

The imprisonment of Sabuchey¹⁵ and many other Tibetan writers, intellectuals and scholars for opposing the Chinese medium education policy led to many Tibetans making covert criticisms on social media platforms. A Tibetan netizen wrote: “These are the times when newspapers are cramped with nice stories, and prisons are filled with good people”. The eminent Tibetan scholar Go Sherab Gyatso, sentenced to 10 years in prison in late 2021¹⁶, was one of the policy's most articulate and powerful critics.

V.2. DOWNGRADING TIBETAN LANGUAGE:

In June 2023, Chinese authorities in Qinghai Province approved amendments to a 1993 regulation¹⁷ on Tibetan language use in Malho (Ch: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The revised regulation that came into effect on 1 September introduced numerous provisions¹⁸ to promote the use and development of the so-called common national language, Mandarin Chinese, in Malho. For instance, Article 17 which provided for the equal promotion of both Tibetan and Chinese medium education in Tibetan middle and primary schools in Malho, has been deleted. This provision had stipulated that Tibetan medium education should be established taking into consideration local realities, which meant that if the schools had a higher proportion of Tibetan students, Tibetan must be adopted as the medium of instruction.

Likewise, Article 8 had been replaced with a new provision that required educational departments to guide all schools and educational agencies in learning and using Mandarin Chinese and, at the same time, promote the use of Tibetan language “according to the requirement”. The original and now expunged provision had provided for the use and development of Tibetan language in the political, economic, cultural, educational, scientific, health, media, and artistic spheres of the local government of the autonomous area.

The downgrading of Tibetan language was evident in the revised Article 3, which calls it as “one of the commonly used languages”, thus doing away with the original provision that mandated Tibetan language as “the main official language of the local government”.

These amendments have clearly been introduced to provide legitimacy to the so-called bilingual education policy that purports to provide choices in using and learning both Mandarin Chinese and Tibetan.



Gyalten school, undated

V.3. CLOSURE OF PRIVATE TIBETAN MEDIUM SCHOOLS:

This year, information about the forcible closure of the Gyalten Getsa school became known, confirming fears that Chinese authorities are hellbent on imposing state-mandated Mandarin Chinese school curriculum over Tibetan medium education. It is one of the largest Tibetan private charity schools in Tibet. In the past several years, there have been concerns that local Chinese authorities will issue threats of closure to the Gyalten school administration if they do not switch to Chinese medium education¹⁹.

The Gyalten Getsa school was founded in 1994 by Gyalten Losang Jampa, the head lama of the Tashi Dhargyal monastery in Tehor Rongbatsa village in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The school offered free primary education in Tibetan language from grades 1 to 6, in addition to English and Chinese language classes, mathematics, Tibetan medicine, and vocational skills such as painting and tailoring. The school organised various activities to promote the Tibetan language and culture, including regular prayer sessions. After the closure of this school, all of its students had been enrolled in state schools.

The continued closure of private Tibetan schools is part of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s aggressive policy of forced cultural assimilation²⁰, posing insurmountable challenges to the survival of such schools where, until recently, Tibetan children could receive education in their mother tongue.



Elementary school booklet on “Xi Jinping Thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era” Photo credit: The Great Translation Movement.



Photo: Wikimedia



VI. ARBITRARY DETENTION AND TORTURE

VI.1. DEATH IN DETENTION:

On 26 January 2023, a senior Tibetan Buddhist scholar known for his mediation died in police custody in Lihang County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture²¹. Geshe Phende Gyaltzen, 56, had been detained in March 2022 for “his active involvement in the renovation of Shedrub Dhargyeling monastery” in Lihang. He had been in good health before his detention.

Severe restrictions were imposed immediately after his passing, including warning residents in Lihang not to speak about the monk’s passing with outsiders. Local Tibetans were barred from paying their last respects to the monk’s body. His family members were denied the opportunity to perform last rites.

In July 2022, less than four months in police detention, he had been admitted to a hospital due to failing health but was returned to the detention facility where he later died.



Geshe Phende Gyaltzen, undated. Photo credit: RFA

Sonam Gyalpo, 68, died on 16 August at his home in Lhasa. He had been imprisoned for 16 years for his involvement in the Tibetan independence movement²²

Tibetan monk Lobsang Tenpa, 52, died of a stomach ulcer on 5 August at his home in Lhasa. He had spent five years in the notorious Drapchi Prison due to his involvement in political activities and had been released in October 2001. He was born in 1972 in Namnying (Ch: Nanni) Township in Kangmar (Ch: Kangma) County, Shigatse City and became a monk in 1982 at Nenyang monastery before his imprisonment²³.



Tibetan former political prisoner Ven. Lobsang Tenpa passed away on 5 August 2023. Photo: Tibet Times

VI.2. INCOMMUNICADO DETENTION AND UNJUST SENTENCING:

Administrative detention is one of the most common means used by Chinese law enforcement agencies to silence activists and human rights defenders. It allows discretionary powers to the police and other law enforcement agencies, such as state security, to hold people without charge or trial under administrative regulations, leading to instances of torture and ill-treatment. Tibetans critical of official policies and government leaders are targeted and punished with administrative detention, typically lasting 15 days.

From 26 October to 10 November 2023, a female Tibetan human rights defender, Tsering Tso, was sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention by the Yushu Public Security Bureau (PSB) in the Yushu city detention centre. It was the second time in three years that Tso was detained in administrative detention.

The Yushu PSB claimed that between 8 and 25 October, Tso committed the crime of "picking quarrels and provoking troubles" by posting a series of videos and personal statements on her Douyin account to "falsely accuse the government and spread misinformation on her private social media account".

In reality, Tso posted two video statements on 16 and 19 October in which she criticised the feudalistic mindset of official power holders and shared the challenges she faced in opening her own business in Kyegudo city, exposing the unfair practices of the local government leaders. Tso is originally from Trika (Ch: Guide) County in Tsoelho (Ch: Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture but works and lives in Yushu City²⁴.

In November, a young Tibetan singer Palden was sentenced on an unknown date a few months after his detention earlier in 2023 in Golog (Ch: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture²⁵. The singer was apprehended after he shared a patriotic Tibetan song on the Chinese video sharing platform KuaiShou. He was held in an undisclosed location for an extended period of time before being sentenced on unknown charges.

During his detention, Palden was deprived of fundamental human rights, such as the right to proper legal procedures, including fair trial rights and the legal defence of choice. The absence of transparency in the judicial process has prompted concerns about the impartiality and validity of the judgment.

In March, information about Tibetan writer and interpreter Zangkar Jamyang emerged more than two years after his arbitrary detention. He was sentenced to four years in prison. The details of his sentencing remain unknown, although it is presumed that he was likely sentenced for "inciting separatism". A Khyungchu (Ch: Hongyuan) County resident in Ngaba (Ch: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, he is being held in Mianyang prison near Chengdu city. He had been arbitrarily detained on the night of 4 June 2020, with his status and whereabouts remaining unknown for an extended period²⁶.

In April, Mr Tsultrim from Tsarima (Ch: Carima) township in Kakhog (Ch: Hongyuan) County, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, was sentenced in secret to two years prison term by the Intermediate People's Court of Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture under the charge of "inciting separatism". Mr Tsultrim had been detained for a second time in February 2023 for merely possessing a photo of the Dalai Lama on his mobile phone. He was detained incommunicado until his sentencing. He was denied the right to a fair trial including barring his family members from observing his trial. He is currently serving his prison term in Yak-nga (Ch: Ya'an) Prison in Sichuan²⁷.

In October, Semkyi Dolma, a Tibetan woman from Damshung County was suddenly detained and in December, her family was notified that she had been sentenced to one and a half years in prison on charges of contacting foreign organisations and individuals²⁸. Born in Chumarleb (Ch: Qumalai) County in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, she too was denied fair trial rights and her family was denied any opportunity to help her access legal representation.

On 29 October, Kunchok Dakpa, a Tibetan monk from Tashi Monastery in Thewo (Ch: Diebu) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture was detained. At the time of reporting, his whereabouts, condition, and reasons for detention remain unknown²⁹. He had a history of traveling to India and studying in the exiled Kirti Monastery in Dharamsala in northern India. He had been summoned for interrogations several times in the past.

VI.3. ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE:

On 23 November, two Tibetan women Tsomo and Nyidon from Sershul (Ch: Shiqu) County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture were arrested for sharing audio files on Tibetan Buddhist teachings on two WeChat groups. Two weeks into detention, their condition and whereabouts remained unknown to their family members³⁰.

On an unknown date in November 2023, four monks - Sonam, Kalsang Tsering, Nyima, and Phuntsok were detained from a prayer session at Lhadong monastery in Nubling village, Gemar (Ch: Kema) Township, Dingri (Ch: Tingri) County, Shigatse (Ch: Xigaze) City. They were detained on the suspicion that they were conducting prayer services for the exiled Tibetan spiritual leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The monks' family members have no information about their situation raising concerns that they are held in undisclosed location vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment³¹.

VI.4. TORTURE AND ILL-TREATMENT:

In May 2023, Geshe Sonam Gyatso was released in poor health after completing a two-year term in Mianyang prison near Chengdu city. Reports indicate critical health. There are significant concerns for his health and well-being, considering that he had been held in prolonged pretrial detention and subjected to rigorous interrogations.



Geshe Sonam Gyatso, undated. Photo: TCHRD

On 29 October, Kunchok Dakpa, a Tibetan monk from Tashi Monastery in Thewo (Ch: Diebu) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, was detained. At the time of reporting, his whereabouts, condition, and reasons for detention remain unknown. He had a history of travelling to India and studying in the exiled Kirti Monastery in Dharamsala in northern India. He had been summoned for interrogations several times in the past. During pretrial detention, it is a routine practice for Chinese police to resort to torture and other inhumane methods to obtain forced confessions.

Gyatso's sister Tsering Lhamo, who had been detained along with him, was released in April 2023 but was hospitalised for emergency treatment for unknown health conditions³². Gyatso was sentenced to two years in prison in July 2022, along with another monk, Rachung Gendun, who received a three-year prison term. Both had been detained in April 2021 for making religious donations to the Dalai Lama and Kirti Rinpoche, the exiled abbot of their monastery. Both monks had been held in pretrial detention in Barkham (Ch: Ma'er kang) city in Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture.

Another political prisoner, Norzin Wangmo, was released in May 2023 in critical health conditions after serving three years of imprisonment. A mother of three, she faced severe torture and forced labour in a women's prison in Kyegudo in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, causing her extensive injuries, including multiple bruises and injury marks on her body³³. Upon release, she could barely stand and needed constant support. Under close surveillance, she is being treated at her home and barred from visiting hospitals³⁴. Wangmo was detained in 2020 and sentenced to three years in prison by the Chumarleb County People's Court for sharing information about a 2013 self-immolation protest by Tenzin Sherab.



Norzin Wangmo, undated. Photo: Tibet Times

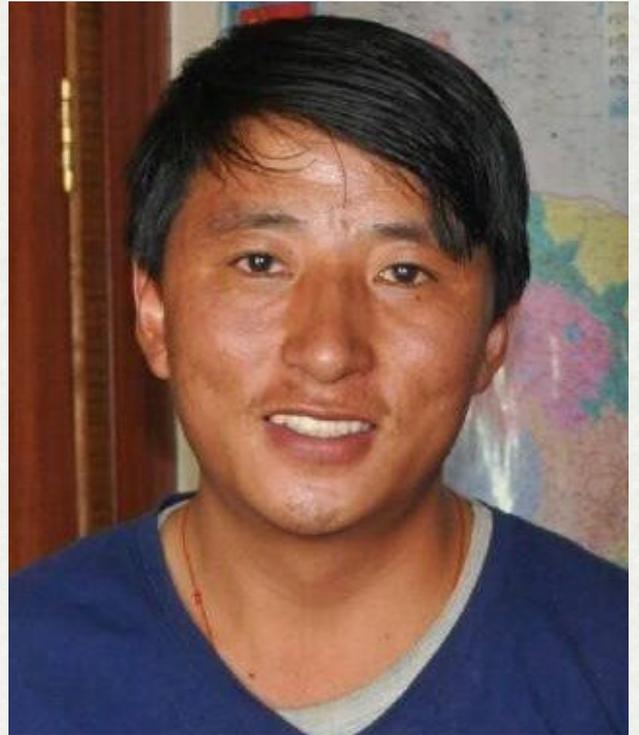
Concerns about the health of Tibetan writer Lobsang Lhundup (Pen-name: Dhi Lhaden) grew after his release in August 2023 after serving a four-and-a-half-year prison term. He was detained in June 2019 and held for two years in pretrial detention before being sentenced on the vague charge of “disrupting social order” in 2021³⁵. Since his release, no information about his condition and well-being has been available.



Lobsang Lhundup (Pen-name: Dhi Lhaden), undated. Photo: TCHRD

Reports also emerged in 2023 of former Tibetan political prisoners still being subjected to beatings and ill-treatment. On 19 August, the well-known Tibetan language advocate Tashi Wangchuk was attacked and severely beaten by a group of unidentified masked men when he arrived at a hotel in Darlak (Ch: Dari) County, Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture from Sershul (Ch: Shiqu) County, Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. He was later evicted from the hotel and refused lodging by several other hotels as well. After the incident, he went to Darlak County Hospital, where he was refused medical treatment³⁶.

The next day, on 20 August, an anonymous group of individuals beat him up severely and threatened him. He was then forcibly driven to a deserted location, where he was detained for more than two hours. His body, belongings, and mobile phone were thoroughly searched, and threats were issued to delete all contents from his phone.



Tashi Wangchuk, undated. Photo: TCHRD

Another former political prisoner, Wangchen, was detained in June by the police in Lhasa and beaten up so severely that he sustained severe injuries to his intestines. At the time of detention, he was on pilgrimage in Lhasa, having arrived with his family from their hometown in Sershul County. His family had to seek urgent medical treatment at a military hospital near Sera Monastery.

Wangchen was detained for posting updates and pictures of his travels online and for travelling to Lhasa city without proper documentation or permits, as is required for Tibetans travelling to TAR from other Tibetan areas outside TAR. Upon his release from prison in April 2023 after serving four years and six months, the prison authorities had not returned his ID card and other documents.

In May 2019, both Wangchen and his aunt, Dolker, were sentenced to prison on charges of “inciting separatism” - Wangchen for staging a protest calling for the missing Panchen Lama’s release and Dolker for spreading information about her nephew’s protest.



A banner praising the China's Communist Party hangs from the front of the Jokhang Temple in Tibet's regional capital Lhasa in an undated photo. Photo: Tsering Woesser



VII. FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND BELIEF

VII.1. MONOPOLISING CONTROL OVER RELIGIOUS SITES:

Chinese authorities managed to steadily erode the right to freedom of religion and belief by introducing more repressive regulations in 2023 to exercise total control over the establishment, management and activities of religious activity sites. The 'Measures for the Administration of Religious Activity Sites',³⁷ which came into effect on 1 September, replacing its previous 2005 version, extensively and substantially broadened the scope and breadth of government control over religious affairs.

The new regulation requires all temples, monasteries, mosques, and other religious institutions to obtain official permission before setting up new religious sites or conducting any religious activities on such sites. Article 3 largely sums up the overriding goals and expectations behind the enforcement of this regulation: "Venues for religious activities should support the leadership of the Communist Party of China, support the socialist system, thoroughly implement Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, abide by the constitution, laws, regulations, rules and relevant provisions on religious affairs management, and practise the core of socialism Values, adhere to the direction of sinicization of China's religion, adhere to the principle of independence and self-management, and safeguard national unity, ethnic unity, religious harmony and social stability.

No organisation or individual may use religious venues to conduct activities that endanger national security, undermine social order, harm citizens'

health, hinder the national education system, violate public order and good customs, or otherwise harm national interests, social public interests, and citizens' legitimate rights and interests."

While the Party-state's 'core leader' Xi Jinping, can put his name on almost anything, including a strange strain of Socialist Thought with Chinese characteristics, Article 16 of the regulation states in no uncertain terms that "Religious activity venues shall not be named after churches, sects, people, etc." This effectively bans the Tibetan Buddhist practice of honouring the teachings and legacies of famous and highly revered religious teachers and legendary monastic institutions by putting their names on temples, monasteries and spiritual retreat centres.



A monk conducts a class beneath a chalkboard adorned with a mural commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Chinese government's governance in Tibet, Tibetan Buddhist College near Lhasa, 31 May 2021. Photo: Mark Schiefelbein/AP

As required under Article 16, a government-instituted management body will not only review the name of the religious site but also, as stipulated in Article 17, its "management organization, rules and regulations, etc" before issuing a certificate of approval.

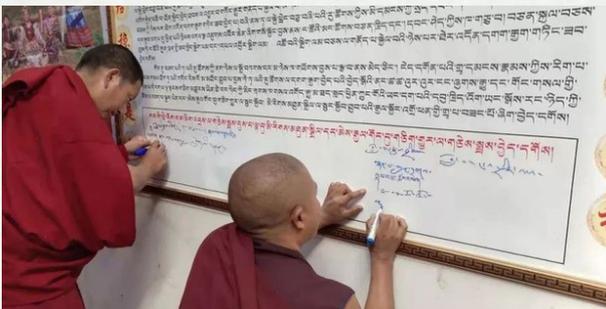
Furthermore, Article 27 mandates that the members of the government-instituted management body are "loyal supporters of the leadership and rule of the Chinese Communist Party" and "mainland residents with Chinese nationality."

Another widespread Tibetan Buddhist practice of building big religious statues in public places has been criminalised in Article 53, which states, "It is prohibited to build large open-air religious statues outside temples and churches." In recent years, there have been cases of giant Buddha statues destroyed by Chinese authorities in Tibet³⁸.

VII.2. ENFORCING PARTY LOYALTY:

There is nothing new in the Chinese Party-state's practice of enforcing loyalty for itself among the Tibetan religious institutions. For decades now, Chinese authorities have been implementing the so-called Patriotic Education and propaganda campaigns to revise Tibetan history, demonise the exiled Tibetan leader Dalai Lama, or advocate the use of Chinese language to better facilitate Tibetan assimilation into the notion of a single Chinese race.

Among the other means it employs to enforce loyalty is to require Tibetan candidates sitting for Chinese government jobs³⁹ or enrolling in educational institutions to pledge allegiance to the Chinese Party-state. In March 2023, the Sichuan Tibetan Buddhist Institute in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture instituted a requirement for prospective students to pledge allegiance to the Party and denounce "separatists" as conditions for admission⁴⁰.



Monks from the Shartsa Monastery were forced to sign a declaration that they are against the Dalai Lama and separatism. Photo: citizen journalist

There are others who are enticed with monetary benefits to demonstrate loyalty to the government's religious policy by, for instance, seeking blessings from Gyalten Norbu, who was appointed as the 11th Panchen Lama, after the enforced disappearance of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, the Dalai Lama-recognised Panchen Lama. In May 2023, local Tibetans in Gyalthang (Ch: Xianggelila), Lithang (Ch: Litang), Bathang (Ch: Batang), Markham (Ch: Mangkang) and Dhapa (Ch: Daba) were promised 100 yuan each for welcoming and seeking blessings from Gyaltsen Norbu when he was on an official tour of these areas⁴¹.

For Chinese authorities, criminalising any signs of influence and loyalty for the Dalai Lama among local Tibetans is crucial for enforcing loyalty for the Chinese Party-state. In April 2023, Tsultrim was sentenced to the high-security Yak-nga (Ch: Ya'an) Prison after he was apprehended in February for storing a photo of the Dalai Lama on his mobile phone⁴². He had been detained earlier in July 2022 for possessing and sharing an image of the 14th Dalai Lama on social media.

In October, Chinese authorities summoned over 400 teachers and students from elementary and middle schools in Ngari (Ch: Ali) City for an 'anti-separatism' workshop where participants were not only required "to confer their allegiance toward the state ideology and condemn separatism and His Holiness the Dalai Lama", but also 'refrain from any religious activities in schools'⁴³.

On an unknown date in November, four monks - Sonam, Kalsang Tsering, Nyima, and Phuntsok were detained on the suspicion that they conducted prayer services for the health and wellbeing of the Dalai Lama in Dingri (Ch: Tingri) County, Shigatse City⁴⁴. At the time of reporting, their families remain uninformed about their whereabouts and conditions.



Gyaltsen Norbu, Communist Party of China appointed Panchen Lama visiting Kham, undated. Photo: RFA

VII.3. CRIMINALISING RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES:

In recent years, Chinese authorities have been increasingly targeting Tibetan Buddhist traditions and rituals as more Tibetans are reported being subjected to detention for taking part in external acts of worship and devotion. In September, four Tibetan men, Gyalo, Tsedho, Bhamo, and Kari, were each sentenced to two years in prison for merely engaging in the sang-sol practice—a ritual intended to purify spiritual pollution, alleviate blockages, and cleanse—while reciting prayers for the longevity and well-being of Tibetan Buddhist masters in Serthar County⁴⁵.

In July, Chinese police forcibly cancelled a Kalachakra initiation ceremony by detaining the organisers and subjecting unarmed protesting devotees to physical assaults in Samey-shi village in Gumong town, Mangra (Ch: Guinan) County, Tsolho (Ch: Hainan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture⁴⁶. Athi Kalsang Tashi Gyatso Rinpoche, a revered local lama who was to lead the ceremony, was threatened by the police to abandon the initiation and return to his home monastery. Police engaged in the desecration and destruction of sacred ritual objects and artworks such as the sand mandala⁴⁷.

In September, many Tibetans were restricted from attending another Kalachakra initiation ceremony that was led by the 7th Gungthang Rinpoche and held in the lower Dzoerge area in Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture⁴⁸. An official directive banned Tibetan devotees from attending the ceremony from areas outside of the prefectural capital of Tsoe (Ch: Hezuo) City. This restrictive measure was prompted by the fear that the religious gathering might exceed 100,000 attendees, a concern later corroborated by numerous online videos that showed hordes of people gathering at the venue in advance⁴⁹.

Chinese security officers set up checkpoints to stop Tibetans from outside of Tsoe City from travelling to the Kalachakra venue. Tsebo, a former police official and a veteran Party member from Chumarleb County in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, was taken to a local police station after he was apprehended along with his family members on their way to attend the Kalachakra ceremony⁵⁰.

Other acts of charity central to Tibetan Buddhist practice have also been criminalised. On 25 October, a Tibetan man, Samphel, was detained incommunicado after he was accused of creating an online group which engaged in charitable activities such as feeding stray animals on sacred days as well as sharing teachings from revered religious teachers among group members in Sakya County, Shigatse City⁵¹.

Similarly on 20 October, Chinese police detained eight Tibetans who were identified as Gonam, Gontse, Jigme Tenzin, Palden, Lochoe, Namgyal, Nordue, and Kalsang, on vague charges of creating criminal organisation in Gyumed (Ch: Jimai) Town in Darlag (Ch: Dari) County, Golog (Ch: Guoluo) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture when they had only collected donations for religious offerings⁵². By using the example of the Tibetans mentioned above to terrorise the whole community, police issued a notice on social media asking local Tibetans to report any information related to the detainees and other so-called criminal organisations in exchange for handsome rewards while warning those that withheld such information would face severe punishment⁵³.

In yet another evidence of censorship, ban, and control over religious symbols, a Tibetan university student, Gephel, was detained, fined and ordered to attend 'political education sessions' for displaying Buddhist flags instead of Chinese national flags as the stage backdrop for a Tibetan New Year event in January 2023, in Muge Township, Zungchu (Ch: Songpan) County, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture⁵⁴.



More than 100,000 people gathered to listen and receive Kalachakra initiation from the seventh Gungthang Rinpoche. Photo: Tibet Times

VII.4. RESTRICTING MOVEMENT OF RELIGIOUS PILGRIMS:

Tibetans living in other Tibetan areas outside of TAR still face restrictions when travelling to Lhasa for pilgrimage and other purposes. Beginning 2023, when pandemic restrictions were lifted, a group of Tibetans travelling to Lhasa for pilgrimage from Kyungchu (Ch: Qiongxi) town, Ngaba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture were forcibly returned when they could not produce a document that could guarantee that they would not cause protests during their stay in Lhasa⁵⁵. Other Tibetans travelling from Nyarong (Ch: Xinlong) County in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province and Qinghai Province faced similar restrictions⁵⁶.

Conducting pilgrimage (Tib: nekor/to circumambulate or nejel/to meet a sacred place) has always been a central feature of Tibetan religious lives, serving as a means for practitioners to seek blessings and inspiration and renew their commitment to their spiritual practice. For Tibetan Buddhists, travelling for pilgrimage to the holy city of Lhasa⁵⁷, where the Tsuglakhang or Jokhang Temple (considered the holiest destination and spiritual centre) is located, represents one of the most important religious practices. The Potala Palace, the Dalai Lama's residence in Lhasa, has always held a special place in the hearts of Tibetans.

In July, widely shared social media posts by human rights defender Tsering Tso, based in Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture showed how Chinese authorities engaged in discriminatory practices against Tibetans seeking to travel to Lhasa. While Chinese travellers could easily travel anywhere in Tibet, including Lhasa using their ID cards, Tibetans were subjected to lengthy processes of furnishing ID cards in addition to fulfilling registration requirements and producing guarantors.

In December, the Gaden Ngamchoe festival in Lhasa was observed amid heavy police presence marked by numerous checkpoints that closely monitored and imposed restrictions on devotees attempting to make their way to the Jokhang Temple⁵⁸. Police also impeded devotees from assembling in large numbers. The festival commemorates the parinirvana or passing away of Je Tsongkhapa, a revered 14th-century Buddhist scholar and founder of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, from which the lineage of the Dalai Lamas originates. It was observed on the 25th day of the 10th month of the Tibetan calendar, which fell on 7 December 2023.



Security Police in the crowd gathered during the commemoration of Gaden Ngamchoe in Lhasa city, Tibet Autonomous Region. Photo: RFA



VIII. TCHRD: YEAR IN REVIEW

1. RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS

Annual Report 2022: Human Rights Situation in Tibet

The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) released its 2022 Annual Report on the human rights situation in Tibet at a press conference held at its office in Dharamshala, India. The report documented 2022 as one of the worst in recent years, with Chinese authorities doubling down on repressive Covid measures to further erode human rights. The report further elaborates that many Tibetans are denied the right to manifest their religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching. Tibetan writers and intellectuals receive heavy prison sentences following lengthy pretrial detention. Tibetan political prisoners and other detainees died from torture injuries without having been charged, in pre- or post-trial detention, or after their release. Many remain held in unofficial detention facilities with no legal oversight that would ensure the prevention of torture and other grave human rights violations. The report comprises nine chapters and is available on TCHRD's official website.



Ms. Tenzin Dawa, executive director, and Mr Ngawang Lungtok, researcher, from the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, attended the press conference for the release of the organisation's annual report

Tibetan Guidebook: Engaging with the UN Special Procedures

On 24 October, in commemoration of United Nations Day, TCHRD launched "Engaging with the UN Special Procedures," a Tibetan handbook on one of the most vital human rights mechanisms within the United Nations. This guidebook acknowledges the pivotal role of Special Procedures in promoting human rights. It is poised to serve as a valuable tool for Tibetan human rights researchers, advocates, activists, and organisations, enhancing their ability to engage more efficiently with the UN Special Procedures.



TCHRD researcher Nyima Woesser and legal officer Phurbu Dolma during the release of the Tibetan guidebook on "Engaging with the UN Special Procedures"

Languishing in Limbo: Tibetan Refugees in Nepal

In conjunction with the Seoul-based Asian Dignity Initiative (ADI), TCHRD released a new report titled “Languishing in Limbo: Tibetan Refugees in Nepal” on 9 December 2023. The report confirms that Nepal, once known for providing a safe haven for Tibetan refugees fleeing Chinese government repression, has become a highly unsafe and insecure place for Tibetan refugees to exercise fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion, culture and expression. The report further elaborates that the situation in Nepal has drastically changed over the years, with devastating consequences for Tibetan refugees. The economic and developmental benefits Nepal promised through a raft of bilateral agreements with China came with a mandatory condition to adhere to the ‘One China’ policy, the strict application of which has resulted in shrinking civil and political space for Tibetan refugees.

The book also details accounts of the experiences of both Chinese and Tibetan officials. Particularly noteworthy are the compelling narratives depicting the challenges faced by Tibetan officials operating under the constraints of the Chinese system. The writer articulates these challenges by drawing from his firsthand experiences and providing readers with a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding the lives of Tibetan officials working in the Chinese system.



TCHRD’s executive director Ms Tenzin Dawa highlighting the escalating human rights violations in Nepal against Tibetans during the release of the new special report “Languishing in Limbo: Tibetan Refugees in Nepal.”



The Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy represented by executive director Ms Tenzin Dawa and researcher Mr Nyima Wooser, with His Holiness the Dalai Lama during special release of the book

Tibetan Author Naktsang Nulo’s New Book

On International Human Rights Day, TCHRD released a new book by the critically acclaimed Tibetan author Naktsang Nulo, known for his unique voice and perspective on life in Tibet under Chinese occupation. The book continues the story of the author’s life as told in his first autobiography, ‘Naktsang Son’s Bittersweet Life’ (Naktsang Shilue Kyiduk), the English translation published by the Duke University Press in 2014.

2. EDUCATION AND AWARENESS

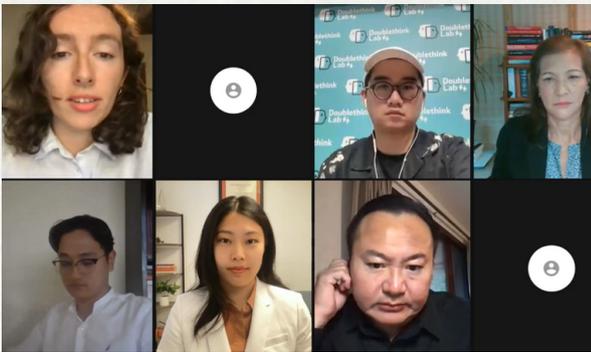
Strengthening Tibetan Democracy Campaign

Aimed at promoting the values, principles, behaviours, and practices and the vital role of education and advocacy in producing an informed and independent public to develop a democratic culture in Tibetan society, TCHRD launched a strengthening Tibetan democracy campaign series in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Under the campaign, short explainer videos were produced on the system and functioning of Tibetan democratic institutions, including civil society organisations and other pressure groups. Debates among the Tibetan youth, both lay and monastic, were organised around the potential ways and means to identify and counter practices that hinder the development of a healthy democratic culture in the Tibetan community.

3. ADVOCACY AND CAMPAIGN

Webinar calls China out on its Transnational Repression campaign

As an NGO side event at the 54th UN Human Rights Council session, TCHRD organised an online webinar titled “Exporting Authoritarianism: China’s Transnational Repression Campaign.” Seven advocacy groups representing Hong Kongers, Taiwanese, Han Chinese, Falun Gong practitioners, Uyghurs, Southern Mongolians and Tibetans spoke against China’s transnational repression campaign in a webinar organised by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD)



Speakers from seven advocacy groups spoke on China’s transnational repression campaign in a webinar organised by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD).

UN Human Rights Council Session

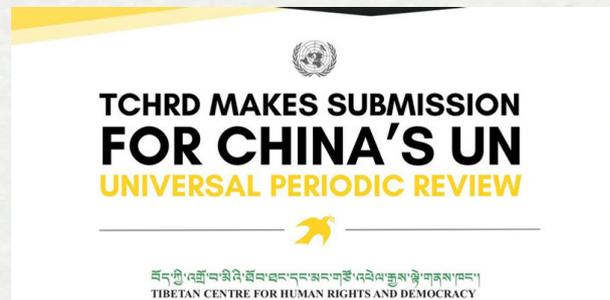
TCHRD, represented by executive director Ms Tenzin Dawa and researcher Mr Ngawang Lungtok, actively participated in the working session of the 54th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. The participation included attending side events, discussions, statements and meetings with various diplomatic missions. The participation was crucial, particularly in the lead-up to the fourth cycle of the Universal Periodic Review of the People’s Republic of China. Mr Lungtok also delivered an oral statement during the general debate under item 4 on Human Rights Situation That Requires the Council’s Attention.



TCHRD executive director Ms Tenzin Dawa (right) and researcher Mr Ngawang Lungtok (left) at the UN Human Rights Council

Universal Periodic Review of People’s Republic of China

In July 2023, TCHRD submitted a report to the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) before the fourth periodic review of the People’s Republic of China scheduled for January 2024. The report detailed various concerns and recommendations regarding specific human rights issues, such as the suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, systematic targeting of the Tibetan language, restrictions on freedom of expression and association, deprivation of legal rights for detainees and prisoners, and instances of torture. In September and November of the same year, TCHRD engaged in a series of advocacy and lobbying efforts at the embassies in New Delhi and the permanent missions in Geneva to urge states to address these issues during the interactive dialogue with the Chinese government. A noteworthy achievement was recorded as 21 states expressed serious concerns and recommendations regarding Tibet during the review process. This demonstrates a significant development in terms of states openly condemning China for its deplorable human rights situation in Tibet compared to the previous review cycle.



The International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearance

TCHRD organised a panel discussion featuring former Tibetan political prisoners and human rights researchers. The panel discussion began with the screening of an explanatory video about enforced disappearance, underscoring the challenges and human rights violations faced by Tibetans, including educators, monastics, intellectuals, and activists. TCHRD’s Tibetan researcher, Mr Nyiwoe, moderated the panel discussion, and the panellists include former political prisoners Mr Gendun Rinchen, Mr Ngawang Woebar, Geshe Tsering Dorje and Mr Wangden Kyab, a researcher at the Tibet Watch organisation.

The event was attended by representatives of the Tibetan civil society members, Tibetan college students, representatives from the media, and the general public.



TCHRD researcher Nyima Woesser moderating the session alongside the panelists.

Human Rights Festival

To commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), TCHRD organised a two-day human rights festival at Hotel Norbu House in Dharamshala, India, from 9 to 10 December 2023. The festival featured a variety of activities, including the launch of a special report on the human rights of Tibetans living in Nepal, an essay competition for school children centred on human rights themes, screenings of two critically acclaimed films—a documentary and an animation highlighting issues of religious freedom in China and the plight of Tibetan nomads in Tibet. Additionally, an open mic session allowed participants at the festival to share their poems and songs, serving as platforms for free artistic expression.



Participants at the Human Rights Day gathering around a bonfire, enjoying poetry and songs performed by fellow attendees.

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