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Asia and the Pacific Subcommittee, House Foreign Affairs Committee
December 6, 2017

“U.S. Policy Toward Tibet: Access Religious Freedom, and Human Rights”

First, I would like to thank Representatives Ted Yoho and Brad Sherman for this opportunity to testify today at this hearing on “U.S. Policy Toward Tibet: Access Religious Freedom, and Human Rights.” As Director of the Tibetan Service at Radio Free Asia, I would like to focus my comments on the challenges we face as a news organization of getting news from the region and fulfilling our congressionally mandated mission of bringing this news to the Tibetan people. It’s extremely difficult for any of our journalists to have normal access to Tibet, which ranks among the world’s worst media environments after North Korea. Nevertheless, many of them maintain various levels of contact with vast networks of trusted sources inside who can provide tips, leads, images, video, and confirmation of events.

Radio Free Asia’s Tibetan Service has had to double its efforts to meet the increasing challenges of bringing the Tibetan people reliable, timely news and information. During President Xi Jinping’s tenure, China has grown even more strident in enforcing a comprehensive censorship and propaganda operation in Tibet. These tactics are designed to keep the Tibetans in the dark as Beijing has stepped up its suppression of Tibetan identity and religious freedom, continued to seize land and mineral wealth from Tibetan-populated areas in China, and increased its attacks on Tibetan cultural heritage by demolishing holy sites and demonizing the Tibetan people’s spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

On any given day, people in Tibet may wake up without access to the Internet and unable to make a phone call because authorities have shut down all communications. Tibetans can find themselves stopped and searched randomly at roadside security checkpoints, their phones and electronic devices confiscated to be probed for sensitive images, like those of the Dalai Lama. Nuns and monks from nearby monasteries may be rounded up by police to be detained or warned about the use of social media. And entire families may be taken into custody under suspicion that one individual, or a close relative, has communicated with foreign media or NGOs.

Beijing has always kept a tight lid on Tibet, mostly to conceal the extent of its abuses stemming from its policies in the region. In 2008 an uprising in Lhasa spread throughout all Tibetan regions within China, culminating in the last protests leading up to the Beijing Olympics. In recent years, there has been a new form of protest by way of self-immolations against Beijing’s rule. Last week, RFA reported the 151st self-immolation protest since the current wave began in 2009. It was carried out by a 63-year-old monk from Kardze who called out for freedom in Tibet before he set himself aflame. These self-immolation protests have explicitly called for greater freedom for the Tibetan people and the swift return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet. They represent the deep frustrations and yearnings of the Tibetan people. But each time such a protest takes place, authorities intensify efforts to clamp down on the sharing of information. Entire prefectures and regions can be plunged into communications darkness in the wake of such protests as messaging apps like WeChat are shut down, along with the Internet and phone lines.

Virtually all expressions of Tibetan identity – including the practice of religion and the teaching of the Tibetan language -- online and on social media are filtered, monitored or outright censored. Those who are considered to have violated what's deemed necessary by authorities to preserve stability often suffer severe consequences such as jailing and torture. Facebook and YouTube are blocked, and Chinese telecoms that control Chinese Internet access have been ordered by the state to ban the use of VPNs – removing nearly any possibility for Tibetans to access sensitive content on outside social media and websites. China's vast system of Internet filters and blocks, known collectively as "The Great Firewall," is tightly enforced in the Tibetan regions – where all online access and the Internet can be shut down at any given moment. Chinese state-sponsored hackers target the Tibetan diaspora and organizations outside China, using malware attacks to shut down overseas servers and IT infrastructure.

Weibo and WeChat, the dominant social media platforms in China, are heavily monitored and restricted. Tibetans who use WeChat to keep in touch with family and friends, but also to discuss sensitive topics in created groups, risk harassment and jail. RFA recently reported how Chinese authorities have begun to infiltrate these groups to monitor and crack down on individuals. This was especially evident in the lead-up to the recent 19th Party Congress. Authorities ramped up efforts to police WeChat and warn Tibetan monastery heads about the severe consequences their entire establishments would face if monks and nuns shared or discussed content deemed sensitive. These measures follow on authorities tearing down satellite dishes on Tibetan homes in Qinghai and Sichuan to prevent access to RFA and VOA radio transmissions.

Chinese authorities have also severely limited access to foreign media sending correspondents to the Tibetan regions, despite assurances in 2015 that this could happen. The few correspondents who obtain permission are allowed to visit only under the condition of being under the constant supervision of state security handlers – making the region, in one *Washington Post* reporter's estimation, as cut off to foreign outlets as North Korea.

Chinese authorities also bring the heavy hand of law enforcement down on any Tibetan caught sharing information of events inside the Tibetan regions with foreign outlets. And their far-reaching efforts to stop the free flow of information extend well beyond the borders of China. Authorities harass Tibet-based families of reporters and stringers working for Radio Free Asia in Washington, D.C., as well as in Nepal and India. Chinese authorities even target Tibetans using WeChat and WhatsApp in the United States. A Tibetan-American in New York, a regular listener to RFA who re-sends our programs out over social media, was somehow identified by Chinese security authorities. Authorities tracked down his family in Tibet, interrogating and threatening them with retribution.

While Chinese journalists travel and work freely in the United States, no RFA Tibetan reporter can obtain a journalist's visa to enter Tibet. Even when applying for visas to visit family, RFA Tibetan reporters are subjected to extensive questioning by Chinese embassy officials, while parallel inquiries are made of family members back home by local authorities. Such a process can go on indefinitely, and, more often than not, results in a denial. Two months ago, one of our reporters was granted permission to visit his ailing brother after weeks of pleading for a visa, and was finally able to visit and spend the last few days with his brother before he passed away. Another reporter, who had not met his family members for 10 years, had to rendezvous in Hong

Kong because he was repeatedly denied a visa to visit home. Yet another, who wanted to visit with relatives in China on a 72-hour, non-visa-requirement transit privilege accorded to all U.S. passport holders, was denied entry in August because he was identified as a Tibetan.

Beijing has recently directed increased resources to build up its state-sponsored Tibetan language media operations on radio, online, and TV, which offers audiences almost solely entertainment programming punctuated with propaganda-driven news updates serving the CCP's narrative. All the while, they continue to try to deny access to RFA's programming on radio and online by jamming shortwave signals and blocking access to RFA's Tibetan news website.

Despite these efforts, or maybe because of them, Radio Free Asia has earned the trust of many Tibetans inside China, who are essential to the effectiveness of RFA's journalism. These networks of cultivated inside sources enable the Tibetan Service to break news about events that would otherwise be ignored by or censored by China's state controlled media. RFA was the first to report on the accelerated destruction of Larung Gar, and broke the news about the vast majority of recent self-immolations. The Tibetan Service has also provided exclusive coverage on China's exploitation of mineral wealth and mining operations in the region, which have prompted large-scale protests. In reporting these developments in Tibet through the years, we have become a reliable conduit for citizen-journalists in Tibet who are keen to inform the rest of the world of what is happening in their country.

The erosion of religious rights and freedoms in Tibet may be best illustrated by the accelerated demolition and crackdown on Larung Gar this year. Larung Gar is one of the most prominent and vibrant Tibetan Buddhist learning centers with monks and nuns from all over the country. We reported the forced expulsions and the extensive demolition of living quarters by the authorities, and how any monk or nun not officially certified as local was immediately expelled. We were able to cover these developments at Larung Gar because many of its residents sent us reports, photos, and video. Similarly, the year before, local activists in eastern Tibet informed us of mining activities in their region that was causing extensive environmental damage. When the mining was finally halted, the local Tibetans informed us that it was outside attention, especially the steady reporting by RFA, which had forced Chinese authorities to acknowledge the environmental damage and put an end to the mining.

Trust is a two-way street for RFA with both our sources and audiences. We recently learned that a monk who was among our sources at Larung Gar was expelled from the center under suspicion of helping us. He told us that though he was devastated, he had no regrets. People are prepared and willing to take such great risks to inform RFA, so we can in turn inform the Tibetan people. Such feedback reaffirms the importance of our mission. As one Tibetan listener inside China recently said, "RFA broadcasts clearly about the conditions inside Tibet and where His Holiness the Dalai Lama is going to visit and what he is doing. Because they broadcast such true information, I strongly trust it." RFA strives to keep earning that trust and keep connecting the Tibetan people with the truth.