

Sonam, the representative of His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, for Africa @ The Wild Fig, Observatory

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TIBET & CHINA - WAYS TO RESOLVE DECADES OF CONFLICT

Tashi Delek, Good Afternoon, Ladies & Gentlemen,

Allow me, at the outset, to thank the respected members of Cape Town Press Club for inviting me to speak about Tibet – my beloved country. I consider it a privilege to be offered the opportunity to address highly learned audience this afternoon. I must admit this is the first time I am being called to address such an established club of the country.

Facts

If you look at the pre-1959/1969 map of the world, you will notice that my country Tibet is situated between Hindustan/India and China. Populated approximately by 6 million people, Tibet lies at the centre of Asia, with an area of 2.5 million square kilometers - a land about the size of whole of Europe. I was a year old child when my parents brought me to India to lead the life of a 'refugee'. The year was 1959 – the year when Chinese army forcibly conquered and annexed the independent and sovereign nation. Mao-Tsetung's deliberate annexation of the country is likened to a large animal mercilessly eating a harmless tiny animal.

My country had its own government, head of state, and the inhabitants practiced their own language, religion, customs, traded in their own currency, followed code of conduct and rules determined by the government headed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Being a peaceful nation, it maintained friendly relations with neighboring countries. But China's annexation forced Tibet's undisputed leader to flee the country and seek political asylum in India. Today, more than 130,000 Tibetans live in exile - this number is inclusive of the Tibetan refugees who continue to risk their lives crossing the high Himalaya as a protest against the harsh, discriminative treatment and suppression by the Chinese authorities.

Truth & Distortion

Tibetans have all along maintained that Tibet was a sovereign independent nation before 1949/1950.

Indeed, from the 2nd century to the middle of 20th century, Tibet was a sovereign nation. It became a recognized powerful nation in Asia. Historically, geographically, linguistically, culturally and religiously, Tibetans are different and distinct from the people living in China. But the Chinese government led by Mao-Tsetung and successive leaders, through lies and distortion of historical facts, have been claiming Tibet is part of China. In late 1970's and 1980's, Chinese leaders had asked Tibet's spiritual leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama to accept Tibet as part of China as a condition for his return to Tibet. Chinese government, in desperation, has even forced many countries to accept Tibet as part of China. This sentence is repeated in the propaganda books of the Chinese government. Lately, Chinese government, full of arrogance, is seen repeatedly using threatening words to sovereign nations which allow visits by Tibet's leader. Impact on bilateral relations and economic consequences are commonly cited when registering their opposition. Some readers and leaders in the west and Africa tend to believe in Chinese propaganda and, unfortunately, allow themselves to be mouths of Chinese government. Leaders in China think that a lie said over and over again for hundred times will become truth. What they also know is that truth can never be erased or concealed. A good example is, many Chinese people who were once informed by the state that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was a demon, and that Tibetan culture is backward, find out that these are totally untrue and erroneous when they meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama and learn about Tibetan Buddhist culture during their travels to free countries. In South Africa, less than a week ago, people were asking why is China so afraid of His Holiness the Dalai Lama visiting the country? Is

there something China is hiding that they don't want the world to know? If they are not afraid then why is South African government not granting visa to him? Quite plainly, truth is what they are scared of because they know truth is not on their side, especially when the issue is about Tibet and human rights violation of the Tibetan people.

Liberation & Development for whom?

Chinese government refuses to accept the fact that Tibet was invaded and conquered, instead they claim Tibet was liberated. The question one must ask is : Liberation for whom as the then Tibetan government and its people never asked China for any help. Admittedly, Tibet then was not developed, nonetheless it was a self-reliant and self-supporting nation. The word 'liberation' is nothing but a pretext used to invade the country.

Since invasion of the country, there have been some development in terms of infrastructure, large buildings, railway, airports, etc . But these came together with huge migration of Chinese people to Tibet.

Railway brings thousands of Chinese migrants to Tibet everyday, thereby increasing the Chinese population and marginalizing the Tibetans to a second-class citizens Chinese government talks about billions of yuan investment in Tibet, but the actual beneficiaries are the Chinese , not the Tibetan inhabitants. Little of the development money is trickling down to 80% of Tibetans living in rural areas, who sustain their livelihood on agriculture and nomadic pastoralism. During the infamous cultural revolution, Tibetan monasteries with priceless objects and valuables were stolen or taken away by the Chinese government. 'Development' is not done with Tibetan people in mind. It is done chiefly for the selfish reason of extracting more minerals , felling of trees, diversion of water, etc from Tibet and transport benefits to China Tibetan people urging Chinese authorities to stop mining in areas sacred to Buddhist believers are arrested and imprisoned.

Do Tibetan people enjoy human rights under Chinese control?

More than 1.2 million Tibetans were massacred, killed or starved to death from 1959 – 1975/76. Many hundreds more have died since then as a consequence of severe torture in the Chinese prison for protesting against the discriminative and wrong policies of the Chinese authorities. Chinese authorities does not tolerate dissenting voices or anybody saying anything against them. Tibetan people who have been suffering under Chinese rule vent their grievances by engaging in peaceful protests, resulting in arrest, imprisonment and harsh treatment. One such major widespread protest occurred in March 2008. Lately, several young monks (ages 17 – 21/23) of Kirti monastery and Ngaba county have set themselves ablaze in protest against the Chinese authorities wrongful treatment of the Tibetan people. Many of them say there is no freedom of religion, no freedom of speech, no freedom of movement, no freedom to practice their own faith properly. Monks in the monasteries are forced to undergo ' patriotic education' during which Chinese authorities ask monks to denounce and defame their spiritual leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Chinese government claims Tibetan people are happy and enjoy their rights, but the desperate actions of young monks poses a big question to the authorities. Foreign reporters are seldom allowed to report on peaceful protests held by the young Tibetan people. Nor do the Chinese authorities allow reputed independent world organization to investigate the true condition of the Tibetan people.

Why are Tibetans protesting?

A simple and plain answer is : For more than 50 years, Tibetans have suffered and are oppressed to this date. Chinese government go to great length to paint a picture of ' happy' Tibet to the outside world. But the reality is Tibetan people live in fear in their own country, they are treated very badly by the Chinese authorities, for example Tibetan writers are arrested and imprisoned on charges of ' inciting' against the authorities. Buddhist monasteries, which are considered temple of learning, and its monk inmates are targeted by the authorities, with least respect for Tibetan Buddhist culture. Visitors to Tibet might say religious freedom is prevalent/existing when they see monks chanting in the Jhokang temple and monasteries or ordinary Tibetans doing prostration and circumambulation. What they do not see is monks are not allowed to receive proper religious education and training from learned teachers. Sadly, Buddhist monasteries are now turned into a mere museum and the monks mere keepers, with no importance attached to learning Buddhist texts. A total disrespect shown by the Chinese authorities.

Unhappy with the wrong policies, Tibetan people, including monks, nuns, school children raise their voice through peaceful

protests in Lhasa, Kardze, Kirti and Ngaba. But the protestors are quickly arrested, severely beaten and tortured in the prison. What the protestors are asking is reflected in the following slogans : We want religious freedom; We want freedom in Tibet; We want return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet. Today, several hundreds of Tibetan political prisoners languish in the Chinese prisons. A prominent religious leader Panchen Lama Gedun Choekyi Nyima believed to be under house arrest since abduction 1995, his actual whereabouts is still not known. Chinese authorities have turned down the request from UN officials and parliamentarians for a face-to-face meeting with him.

Chinese President Hu Jintao talks about developing ' harmonious society'. While it may sound a good idea, how will there be ' harmony ' when people are always suspected, intimidated and threatened through constant monitoring of their movements.

Finding a resolution

Are Tibetans really interested in resolving the long standing problem. The answer is Yes. This is why Tibet's leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama made sincere efforts in finding a peaceful solution from 1979 to 1993. During this period few fact-finding delegation travelled to Tibet and exploratory talks were held with Chinese leaders. Unfortunately, formal contact discontinued in 1993.

Deeply concerned of the Tibetan people's suffering under China's authoritarian rule, His Holiness the Dalai Lama and his administration in –exile renewed contact with Beijing leaders in 2002. Since then eight rounds of talks and one informal talks under emergency situation were held between the envoys of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Chinese authorities In 2008, the Chinese side had asked Tibetan view on the form of autonomy that the Tibetans are seeking. As a result, on October 31, 2008, Tibetan envoys presented a document titled ' Memorandum on Genuine Autonomy for the Tibetan People' to the Chinese authorities. Later, a seven point explanation was given by the envoys. If you read the document, you will find Tibetan side has not made any claim for independence or separation of Tibet from China. The document discusses about the real or genuine national regional autonomy for all Tibetans under a single administration. Such a proposal is very much within the legal or political framework of China. Addressing the European Parliament in 2008, His Holiness the Dalai Lama very clearly stated that the suggestions were made with the 'sole purpose of making a sincere effort to address the real problems in Tibet.'

Unfortunately, the Chinese authorities have rejected the memorandum. On November 10, 2008, Mr. Zhu Weiqun, Executive Vice-Minister of the UFWD has distorted the issues raised in the memorandum by branding it as ' Tibet Independence', ' half-independence' or ' covert independence.' All through this time, many political analysts and cynics have said China is merely pretending to engage with Tibetans under international pressure; actually, China has no intention to resolve the problem, because they have nothing to lose and are already controlling Tibet. . Chinese leaders are playing a waiting game till the demise of the Tibetan leader, which will lead to natural death of the Tibet issue.

At this stage, we need to ask this question : Is China not interested in finding a solution to the Tibetan problem? Perhaps yes, then , why is it that they continue to harbor suspicion toward the Tibetan people? On the other hand, if they have no intention to resolve the problem, is it fair on their part to bully and mislead the international community. Must international community, then, trust the Chinese authorities?

At the moment, Chinese authorities are not accepting the fact that there is a Tibet problem. But it is true there exists major problem in Tibet, where its inhabitants are totally marginalized and discriminated owing to the policies of the Chinese government. Chinese leaders may have thought Tibet problem will disappear after 50 odd years. But, the increasing number of dissent and protest by new generation of Tibetans growing up under Chinese rule, has proven that the Tibetan people's spirit is strong and remains undiminished. They aspire to achieve total freedom.

The memorandum does not discuss the interest of the Tibetan people alone. It addresses the interest of both Chinese and Tibetan people. Tibet's leader His Holiness the Dalai Lama has consistently spoken about the concerns and interest of all communities living in Tibet. Many Chinese writers, scholars and businessmen have come to believe that it is in the interest of China to let Tibetan enjoy genuine autonomy.

I thank you.

Sonam Tenzing

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