

GENERAL ASSEMBLY
Human Rights Council
Forty-Third Regular Session
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Item 3: Clustered Interactive Dialogue – Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Statement delivered by Christa Meindersma on behalf of the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights

Mr. Vice-President,

We thank the Special Rapporteur on minority issues for his report. In the case of Tibetans, we agree that language issues are among the main grievances that contribute to claims of discrimination in education and lead to tensions between them and authorities.

In Tibetan areas, policies marginalising Tibetan language in the education system have, in the past decade, led to a number of large-scale protests, reflecting a growing fear of the erosion of Tibetan language, the bedrock of Tibetan identity, religion and culture.¹ A number of Tibetan self-immolators have, in their last words or statements, also referred to the importance of protecting their language.²

But instead of addressing these grievances, China has responded by punishing those expressing concerns. In May 2018, Tashi Wangchuk was sentenced to five years in prison for ‘inciting separatism’, after he attempted to use Chinese laws to protect Tibetan language education and use.³ Recently, rights groups also learned that a Tibetan man named Tsering Dorjee was detained in a ‘re-education’ facility for over a month in February 2019, for discussing, on the phone with his brother, the importance of teaching Tibetan to their children.⁴

¹ In October 2010 for example, over 1,000 Tibetan students protested in Rebkong (Ch. Tongren) County, Qinghai, against plan to downgrade further Tibetan as a medium of instruction in schools. (*Protests by students against downgrading of Tibetan language spread to Beijing, International Campaign for Tibet, 22 October 2010, <https://savetibet.org/protests-by-students-against-downgrading-of-tibetan-language-spread-to-beijing/>*). Protests across Qinghai reoccurred in 2012 and 2014, with eight participants from a November 2012 protest being sentenced with prison terms of up to four years. *Tibetans Fight to Salvage Fading Culture in China*, New York Times, 28 November 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/29/world/asia/china-tibet-language-education.html?_r=0

² As he lay dying following his self immolation in 2012, monk Ngawang Norphel for example said: “Every nationality needs freedom, language and tradition. Without language, what would be our nationality? [Should we then] call ourselves Chinese or Tibetan?” (Video posted on Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6jW13Kfv8Y>)

³ *A Tibetan Tried to Save His Language. China Handed Him 5 Years in Prison*, The New York Times, 22 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/world/asia/tibetan-activist-tashi-wangchuk-sentenced.html>

⁴ *Tibetan man criminally detained for phone conversation about Tibetan language education*, Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, 20 December 2019, <https://tchrd.org/tibetan-man-criminally-detained-for-phone-conversation-about-tibetan-language-education/>

Lack of Tibetan language education marginalises Tibetans and prevents them from accessing educational and job opportunities. In the long run, it reinforces ethnic discrimination and inequality.

We therefore call on the Human Rights Council to urge China to comply with standards of international and national law, so that Tibetans have access to inclusive and equitable quality education and their right to learning, speaking and using their mother tongue is respected.

Thank you, Mr. Vice-President.