



STAND UP FOR TIBET

Tibet Lobby 2017

Background to Ask 2: Stop the removals and demolitions at Larung Gar

Call on the UK government to urge China to immediately stop the evictions and demolitions at the Larung Gar Buddhist Institute in eastern Tibet and allow all Tibetans in Tibet to freely practice their religion without government interference.

Background – Larung Gar Buddhist Institute

Larung Gar Buddhist Institute is located in Serta County in Kardze, eastern Tibet (Chinese: Serta County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province). It is believed to be the largest Buddhist institute in the world, with official estimates putting the population at 10,000 people, and local estimates putting the number of residents significantly higher. It is also one of the most important centres of Tibetan Buddhist learning, with monks, nuns and lay people staying there, as well as visiting students coming from Tibet, China and other countries.

The government order

In June 2016, the government of Serta County issued an order stating that the number of residents at Larung Gar had to be reduced to 5,000 people by October 2017. The order was issued on behalf of China's central government. It laid out a schedule for residents to be removed and for their vacated residences to be demolished, along with other buildings such as nuns' hostels and old people's homes. The order stated that if any of these deadlines were missed then punishments would be imposed, such as further forced evictions or even the destruction of the entire site.

The order also effectively put Larung Gar's internal affairs under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It imposed a system of joint management on Larung Gar, with CCP officials outnumbering monastic officials three to two under the new regime, and stipulated that Larung Gar's financial management should be handed over to Chinese authorities.

The order was issued without any consultation with the leadership or residents of Larung Gar. Only after it was issued did official sources state that the measures were for the residents' safety, to ease overcrowding and to reduce the risk of fire.



Larung Gar Buddhist Institute

Demolitions, forced removals and their consequences

The demolitions began a month later, in July 2016. They were carried out by Chinese work teams consisting of workers, local government officials, police and security services, accompanied by digging machinery. The demolitions and removals took place throughout the rest of the year until December, when there was a pause due to the winter conditions. By December 2016, around 6,700 people had been evicted and at least 1,500 buildings had been destroyed.

The demolitions had a devastating effect on people across Tibet, as well as the residents. One resident likened the demolitions to “destroying heaven”. Three nuns are reported to have taken their own lives in protest against the demolitions. One of them, Rinzin Dolma, committed suicide on 20 July and left a note saying she could not “bear the pain of the endless Chinese harassment of innocent Buddhists who quietly studied at the institute”.

Those removed from Larung Gar were returned to their native regions of Tibet, often miles away from their colleagues and friends at Larung Gar. Due to the travel restrictions imposed in the Tibetan Autonomous Region, it is highly unlikely that residents will be able to meet again. This was reflected in video footage of the removals that was smuggled out of Larung Gar and which shows residents crying as those being removed are put on coaches and driven out of the site. Residents who have been removed from the site have been made to sign pledges promising not to return to live there.

Monks and nuns who have been returned to their native regions from Larung Gar have been prevented from joining new monasteries and nunneries. Some have been subjected to humiliating ‘patriotic re-education’ sessions, in which they are required to sing Chinese propaganda songs and denounce their own Tibetan culture and religion.

The demolitions and evictions at Larung Gar are expected to restart in the spring.

Freedom of religion in Tibet

The demolitions at Larung Gar are part of a wider attack on freedom of religion in Tibet. Despite the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) being officially atheist, the government attempts to exert control over Tibetan Buddhism, a religion that unifies many Tibetans. The CCP sees its control over Tibetan Buddhism as a means of ending the resistance to its military occupation of Tibet. In April 2016, Chinese president Xi Jinping stated: "Religious groups... must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party of China."

The US State Department's 2016 report on international religious freedom describes the repression of religious freedom in Tibet as "severe". It records "reports of extrajudicial killings, prolonged detention without trial, torture, and arrests of individuals due to their religious practices".

Tibetan monasteries and nunneries have increasingly been put under the control of the CCP. They are required to fly Chinese flags and many are run from inside by committees loyal to Beijing. CCTV cameras are often installed. Numbers of residents at each monastery are tightly regulated. Chinese regulations also forbid Tibetans from establishing new monasteries. Tibetans are intimidated by security forces at prayer festivals and denied the opportunity to travel for religious teachings.

The Chinese government continues its ongoing vilification of the Dalai Lama, accusing him of being a separatist seeking to "split the motherland" and of "instigating protests in Tibet including the recent wave of self-immolations." China is also attempting to control the future of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1995, Chinese authorities abducted Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, who had been recognised by the Dalai Lama as the Panchen Lama. China then installed its own candidate, Gyaltzen Norbu, who has been groomed to be a Communist Party mouthpiece. The Panchen Lama traditionally chooses the Dalai Lama's successor. Gedhun Choekyi Nyima remains missing and China refuses to provide any evidence of his whereabouts or well-being and have denied all requests for access.

International pressure

MPs, representatives and government bodies around the world have condemned the evictions and demolitions at Larung Gar:

The co-chairs of the United States' Human Rights Commission wrote to the Chinese Ambassador to the United States in October 2016, expressing their "deep concern" over the removals and destruction and urging China to "stop the demolitions and evictions, rebuild and restore the affected infrastructure, and permit all those people under Chinese jurisdiction who wish to pursue their Buddhist faith to do so without government interference or 'guidance'."

The European Parliament, the legislative body of the European Union, passed a strong resolution in December 2016, demanding that China halt the demolitions and forced removals at Larung Gar and respect Tibetans' religious freedoms.

There has, as yet, been little condemnation from senior government ministers and leaders. Pressure from these sources would draw international attention to the demolitions and evictions, and put pressure on the Chinese government to halt them. Such pressure would also honour past statements from international governments, including the UK, that they are concerned with the protection of the right to religious freedom in Tibet.

Further recommendations

- The UK government should urge China to reverse its decision to put Larung Gar under majority control by members of the Chinese Communists Party. It should instead permit residents and clerical authorities to run the site's affairs.
- The UK government should urge China to end its wider violations of the right to freedom of religion in Tibet. It should lift the internal surveillance at monasteries, lift restrictions on freedom of movement on monks and nuns, and allow Tibetans to conduct religious activities without interference.
- The UK government should urge China to address concerns regarding overcrowded religious institutes by allowing Tibetans to establish more institutes and build more facilities.



Demolitions at Larung Gar