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## **ICT statement : China's propaganda on the 17-point agreement distorts history and impedes path to resolving the Tibet problem**

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Today, the Chinese authorities are expected to announce plans to celebrate the 60th anniversary of what they call "the peaceful liberation of Tibet." This so-called "liberation" is based upon the signature by representatives of the Chinese and Tibetan governments on May 23, 1951, of the "17-Point Agreement." This somewhat negotiated agreement between Buddhist Tibet and Communist China effectively changed Tibet's international legal status from independent nation to a region of the People's Republic of China.

The strident tone of the state media announcements of anniversary celebrations is evidence of Beijing's use of this controversial document to justify its rule in Tibet. But the reality of the situation in Tibet today underscores how far China's policies have departed from the 17 points of the agreement, including its commitments to preserve Tibetan political and religious institutions.

Mary Beth Markey, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said today: "Beijing is ironically celebrating an agreement about promises made to Tibet but not kept. Its failure over the last 60 years to respect the priorities for Tibet set forth in the 17 point agreement, including a large measure of self-rule, should be an occasion for reflection in Beijing and not coerced celebration in Tibet."

The 17-Point Agreement, broadly accepted to have been signed under duress by the Tibetans, left the Tibetan government's decision-making over religion, language and political institutions intact in exchange for its acceptance of Chinese sovereignty. The agreement provided guarantees to respect mutual needs and establish a relationship between the two governments. Eight years after the Agreement was signed, in March 1959, tens of thousands of Tibetans were killed after they rose up against Chinese rule in an attempt to protect the Dalai Lama and defend their freedoms. Both the Tibetans and Chinese governments repudiated the Agreement, and cooperation effectively concluded with the Dalai Lama's escape into exile.

In the six decades since the agreement was signed, the Chinese central government has unilaterally instituted increasingly hardline policies that undermine Tibetan culture and religion; the Tibetan people have been denied freedom of expression; the use of their language has been downgraded, and their economic resources appropriated by the Chinese state, with increasing numbers of Chinese migrants moving to Tibet.

On the 2008 anniversary of the '59 uprising Tibetans once again risked their lives to assert their distinct identity in a series of largely peaceful protests that swept across Tibet. Such protests continue in several Tibetan areas today. In the weeks leading up to the 60th anniversary, Tibetans continue to disappear<sup>1</sup>, often being taken from their homes in the

middle of the night to face torture and imprisonment. A particularly violent crackdown at Kirti monastery in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan has drawn condemnations globally by foreign leaders. (ICT report: <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/ngaba-students-protest-crackdown-authorities-respond-new-information-deaths-tibetans-who-t>).

“The Chinese authorities’ transparent propaganda effort on Tibet restricts the space in which to find a peaceful and mutually agreeable solution to the Tibet issue,” said Mary Beth Markey. “By choosing to trumpet ‘liberation’ and ignore the festering grievances of the Tibetan population, the central government only deepens resentments that put it farther from the legitimacy it seeks in Tibet.”

The 17-Point Agreement recognized Tibet as a separate and distinct polity within the borders of the People's Republic of China. Today this position underlies the Dalai Lama's Middle Way approach that seeks genuine autonomy for Tibetans within the People's Republic of China (<http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=115&rmenuid=11>). The Tibetan government in exile was established by the Dalai Lama en route to India and is the historical continuation of the Tibetan government that signed the 1951 agreement.

The 17-Point Agreement granted Tibetans elements of autonomy that were subsequently rescinded by the Chinese, much of which the Dalai Lama is seeking to negotiate today. These include decision-making by the local government without compulsion by central authorities, and respect for religious freedom and the Tibetan language in education. (<http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=185&rmenuid=11>).

The 17-Point Agreement proved an imperfect and short-lived solution to mending together the Chinese Communists' demands for the acquiescence of sovereignty with Lhasa's requirements for the preservation of Tibetan self-rule. It was deeply compromised by the conflict between Communist ideology and recognition of Chairman Mao as preeminent leader and the Tibetan's deep devotion to the Dalai Lama as national leader and protector deity incarnate.

Mary Beth Markey said: "The 17-Point Agreement represents a hope that negotiations between the Chinese and Tibetans could again bear fruit. This rests heavily on the willingness of the Dalai Lama to accommodate Chinese concepts of territorial sovereignty and significantly on the willingness of the Chinese to forsake their distorted narratives on Tibet and to recognize the right of Tibetans to enjoy the autonomy that existing Chinese law should provide. Releasing themselves from the burden of maintaining the fallacy of a peaceful liberation is one of the crucial steps that the Chinese authorities have to take to gain the legitimacy they seek on Tibet."

### **Notes for editors**

1. An English translation of the 17-Point Agreement is at: <http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=185&rmenuid=11>

2. The Middle Way approach is defined by the Tibetan government in exile as: "A non-partisan and moderate position that safeguards the vital interests of all concerned parties-for Tibetans: the protection and preservation of their culture, religion and national identity; for the Chinese: the security and territorial integrity of the motherland; and for neighbors and other third parties: peaceful borders and international relations." (<http://www.tibet.net/en/index.php?id=115&rmenuid=11>)

3. Many Tibetans believed at the time of the signature of the 17-Point Agreement that it made very little difference if Tibet was regarded internationally as a part of China as long as their social and cultural autonomy were safeguarded, according to Professor Tsering

Shakya's authoritative history of modern Tibet, "The Dragon in the Land of Snows" (Pimlico, 1999). Shakya cites the late Professor Dawa Norbu as saying that in the Tibetans' view their independence was not a question of international legal status, but of "our way of life and culture, which was more real to the unlettered masses than law or history, canons by which the non-Tibetans decided the fate of Tibet." The late Indian Prime Minister Nehru noted at the time that the Tibetans accepted the Agreement "without joy and under the compulsion of circumstances." (Parthasarathi, "G. Jawaharlal Nehru; Letters to Chief Minister, Vo. 5 1958-1964," University of Oxford Press, India, 1989).

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