

## New Delhi escapes Karmapa muddle

By Saransh Sehgal

**DHARAMSALA, India** - In a gesture to rehabilitate the reputation of the 17th Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje, hurt by suspicions that he was a "Chinese spy" and involvement in money laundering, the Indian government has recently given permission for the Karmapa to travel out of Dharamsala and, for the first time, officially recognised him as a Tibetan religious leader.

The Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje], the third-highest monk in Tibetan Buddhism, has been given the green-light by New Delhi to take a month-long pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, Buddhism's holiest place, and Varanasi, his winter retreat.

The Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] has been at the center of a cash controversy that broke late January amid charges of espionage for China which shocked India and the Buddhist community across the globe. Now New Delhi has found it was financial mismanagement, not money laundering, which led to the suspicion about his being a Chinese spy.

"The Karmapa Office of Administration is deeply grateful to the Indian government for its confidence in His Holiness the Karmapa. Most specifically, we thank the government for kindly approving His Holiness' travel plans to Varanasi, via Bodhgaya, for his winter retreat and spring teaching of 2011," said an official statement from the Karmapa administration soon after the Indian government in New Delhi approved his trip to Bodhgaya.

The Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] also expressed his gratitude in a personal message, "Varanasi is the site of the very first Dharma teaching by Lord Buddha, and also an ancient cradle of Sanskrit culture and learning. This makes it a particularly sacred place for Buddhists. As a follower of Buddha's teachings and of the Kagyu lineage that springs directly from the sacred ground of India, I feel that such opportunities to visit these sites give great meaning to my life. I am very much looking forward to sharing the Dharma with Dharma friends in Varanasi."

A probe by Indian intelligence agencies has found the suspected "dirty" money found in the Karmapa's possession - around US\$777,000 in nearly two dozen foreign currencies - was indeed legitimate donations from various nations.

India's Home Secretary *G. K. Pillai* gave the government's first positive reaction after weeks of cautious remarks and timid silence over the case. Speaking at a press conference on March 4, Pillai said, "*The Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] is a spiritual leader. He is second in ranking to the Dalai Lama. Currently, the Karmapa is in prayer and by the end of March he will write to the home ministry [about] how he will put his house in order.*"

The statement has been welcomed by the Tibetan Buddhist community as they start celebrations for Losar - the Tibetan lunar New Year, which began on March 5. The Karmapa is now marking Losar in Sarnath, a deer park in India's Uttar Pradesh state where Buddha preached his first sermon. There he will participate in rituals and later giving Dharma teachings in Thrangu Monastery, one of the park's oldest monasteries.

In Bodhgaya, the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] was received by a large number of Buddhists - Tibetan and Indian - and well as international followers who wished to show deep faith in their "living Buddha". Mingyur Rinpoche, the renowned Buddhist teacher and author of the bestselling book *The Joy of Living*, who heads the Tergar Monastery in Bodhgaya, told reporters, "We are very grateful that His Holiness' name has been cleared."

Rinpoche thanked the Indian government and Tibetan government-in-exile and was also thankful for blessings from the Dalai Lama and others. "We appreciate everyone's support," he said. "I felt very sad and upset about the allegation that he [Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje] was a Chinese spy," Rinpoche commented. "This allegation hurt the disciples of His Holiness. He is an enlightened being, but for us it's been very hurtful and upsetting."

New Delhi's decision to recognise Ogyen Trinley Dorje as the 17th Karmapa - the second-highest Tibetan monk after the Dalai Lama - is a major policy shift. Indian authorities had not trusted Trinley Dorje since his dramatic escape from Tibet to India in 2000, as he is the first reincarnation of a high lama officially accepted by the communist government of China.

It is believed that the mounting international pressure from Buddhist followers across the globe and the backing of the Dalai Lama are the main reason for the Indian government's u-turn.

A Buddhist delegation submitted a memorandum on February 26 to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh requesting that he allow the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] to visit his official seat at Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim, and that he personally look into the problems Trinley Dorje was facing.

While the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] has been all but cleared, there remains a war of words over the case between Himachal Pradesh state, which led the investigation, and the power center in New Delhi.

State Chief Minister Prem Kumar Dhumal told reporters on March 3 that New Delhi had not communicated to the state about "giving a clean chit [slate]" to the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] in the currency seizure case. "Neither have we held him guilty, nor given him a clean chit." Dhumal had told media.

"We have come to know from media reports that the center has given a clean chit to the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje], but we have not received any official intimation from the government," Dhumal told reporters. "The government can part with relevant information if it wishes to do so," he added.

During the course of the investigation the state government took over possession of the Gyuto monastery where the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] resides, as the land was declared *benami* (unauthorised). A number of Tibetan properties in the state are being investigated as Tibetans living in India as refugees are not authorised to buy land under their own name.

Questions have been raised over the state government's handling of the case; as it was Himachal Pradesh police officials who provided information to the Indian media that led to rumours about the Karmapa's "Chinese connection" and the state is ruled by the opposition Bharatiya Janata Party.

Since the news broke, the Karmapa administration had kept a firm stance on allegations that he was an agent for the Chinese - that they were a fabrication and that it was unfair to question His Holiness' integrity based on such "flimsy evidence and speculation".

Though the government has cleared the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje], the court case of the foreign currency seizure is still ongoing. Seven men involved are still being held under judicial custody, which was extended by the court on orders from a government in New Delhi that likely wants the case to proceed transparently due to international interest. "The judicial custody of all the seven people arrested in connection with the foreign currency seizure was extended by Chief Judicial Magistrate, Rajesh Tomar," Superintendent Police of the region Santosh Patyal said in late February.

Experts have described India's handling of the issue as a shambles. Dr Dibyesh Anand, an expert on Tibet who teaches at the London's Westminster University, told Indian channel Zee News that China benefits most from the controversy:

*China gains from this episode without having to lift a finger. First, the Tibetans living in India will feel hurt by Indian media's insensibility [its accusations the Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje was a Chinese spy] and thus may become preoccupied by this. Second, Karmapa cannot become a unifying religious*

*figure for the Tibetans and their supporters after the 14th Dalai Lama passes away because in order to do that, he needs to remain in India, have trust of the government and people, and be allowed to travel without too many restrictions. China gains from this. Third, Tibetans inside Tibet will realize that their notion about India being tolerant and welcoming is incorrect since Indians do not care for the sentiments of the Tibetan Buddhists.*

International pressure on the central government over the Karmapa case has on the rise, and not only his followers but also foreign governments have kept a close watch on India's handling of the case.

Some Tibetans believe Beijing has planned the whole controversy in an attempt to destabilise the Dalai Lama's succession. "The communist government of the People's Republic of China and some ill-wishers of Buddhism in India has ganged up to defame the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje]. They are out to conspire against our religious leader," a spokesman of the All India Buddhist Monks Association, Minglv Rinpocha, told the Gulf News.

He added, "The Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] and all our Tibetan brethren living here respect India as their motherland. We can never bring a slur on it. All that is happening with the Karmapa is a part of well thought-out conspiracy."

As news that the Karmapa [Ogyen Trinley Dorje] had been cleared reached his followers, Buddhist supporters from all across the world sighed with relief. Karen, a Buddhist from the United States said, "this clearance had to come, the truth prevailed. We kept our faith in him [the Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje], as a Buddhist disciple - this is big moment."

While the Indian government has exerted its damage control on the Karmapa case, it will be interesting to see whether New Delhi, after clarifying its stand on Ogyen Trinley Dorje being the 17th Karmapa, will now allow him to take his official seat at the Rumtek monastery in Sikkim.

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