

DESTROYING HEAVEN

China's campaign of destruction at Larung Gar

THEMATIC REPORT

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free
TIBET

TIBET WATCH
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Contents

Introduction	1
The sources in this report	2
Previous demolitions at Larung Gar	4
Larung Gar in 2016	5
The 2016 plan	5
The 2016 demolitions and removals	7
Forced evictions	8
The impact of the demolitions	10
The 2017 demolitions and removals	10
Tourism	13
Cataloguing the destruction	15
Conclusion	20
Appendix: China's human rights obligations	22
The right to adequate housing	22
Freedom of association and assembly	22
Freedom of religion	22



Larung Gar in the evening, 2016 (Jesse Rockwell)

Introduction

In July 2016, regional authorities and Chinese workers began carrying out a plan to drastically reduce the population of Larung Gar, the largest Tibetan Buddhist institute in the world. The plan required residents to be evicted and their houses to be torn down. Residents of Larung Gar, which lies in occupied eastern Tibet, were not consulted about the plan, despite claims by Chinese authorities that the aim was to protect the safety of the residents by reducing overcrowding and the risk of fire.

After one year of forced removals of residents and demolitions of their homes, extensive damage has been done to the site. Over 4,800 people have been removed and 4,700 buildings, mostly residences, have been destroyed since July 2016. The demolitions campaign has been condemned by Tibetans; Tibet supporters; international bodies, such as the European Union; and United Nations special experts.

In this joint report, Free Tibet and Tibet Watch will show the scale of the damage to Larung Gar and the impact on its residents. Using satellite imagery from before and after demolitions took place, testimonies from residents and accounts from journalists who have gained access to Larung Gar, this report will argue that the demolitions have not been motivated by concerns over the residents' safety. Instead, the objectives behind the destruction appear to be the elimination of an alternative source of authority to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule and the reduction of an influential and highly respected Tibetan Buddhist site to a tourist destination.

Tibet's Buddhist institutions play an integral role in the day-to-day lives of Tibetans. Teachers, students, monks and nuns within Tibetan Buddhist institutions are some of the key drivers behind the resistance to Chinese occupation. The campaign of destruction at a respected religious institution like Larung Gar should be seen as an attempt to limit the influence of Buddhism on the Tibetan people and, more broadly, an attack on Tibet's culture, religion and way of life.

The sources in this report

This report relies on three main sources of information. The first source comprises the accounts of journalists and other individuals who have gained access to Larung Gar. Some of this comes from their public reporting, the rest from direct conversations with Free Tibet about what they saw. The second source is satellite imagery of Larung Gar taken in 2016 and 2017 so that the damage done to the site can be clearly identified. These images were acquired via the assistance of Apollo Mapping, satellite specialists based in the USA.



The centre of Larung Gar in January 2016 (Apollo Mapping)



The centre of Larung Gar in April 2017 (Apollo Mapping)

Lastly, the report draws on residents' testimonies, images and videos smuggled out of Larung Gar, which were acquired by Tibet Watch.

Tibet Watch was established in 2006 to carry out in-depth research on events in Tibet, one of the most closed places on earth. Despite Tibet being closed off to most of the outside world the organisation uses a network of contacts within Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora to expose human rights abuses and highlight Tibetan resistance. To ensure accuracy at all times, all of the information that Tibet Watch receives is carefully checked and corroborated prior to publication. In general, sources are kept confidential by Tibet Watch to prevent reprisals against those who have given testimony or against their families and communities.

Background: Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy

Situated 4,000 meters above sea level, Larung Gar Buddhist Academy is one of the largest and most significant Tibetan Buddhist institutes in the world. It is located in the Larung Valley in Serthar County in Kardze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP)¹, part of the region that Tibetans know as Kham, eastern Tibet. It was established as a monastic encampment, or gar, by Khenpo² Jigme Phuntsok in 1980 and has grown to become home to anywhere between 10,000 and 40,000 residents. It has welcomed monks, nuns and visiting students from Tibet and China, as well as other countries like South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia, while tens of thousands of people around the globe study Buddhism through online courses taught by Sodargye Rinpoche, a senior khenpo at Larung Gar.³

Despite the restrictions imposed on Tibetan Buddhism under the Chinese occupation, Larung Gar has contributed greatly to the spread of the religion and to the preservation and international spread of Tibetan culture.⁴ Hundreds of eminent Buddhist scholars and practitioners have been educated at Larung Gar and have then gone on to found their own Dharma centres around the world.

The founder of Larung Gar, Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, was a highly respected figure among Tibetan Buddhists, who recognised him as the incarnation of Tertön Terchen Lerab Lingpa, a teacher of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. The foundation of Larung Gar is also recognised among Tibetan Buddhists as fulfilling an ancient prophecy,

¹ In Chinese: Seda County, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province

² 'Khenpo' is a religious title in Tibetan Buddhism equivalent to an abbot

³ Introduction to Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche

<http://www.khenposodargye.org/2013/03/introduction-to-larung-wuming-buddhist-institute/>

⁴ Ibid.

foreseen by the first Dodrupchen Rinpoche.⁵ The prophecy identified the name of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok, his disciples, the location of the institute, and his achievements in spreading Buddhist teachings. The site is considered blessed for Tibetans and was, therefore, chosen for Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy.⁶



Homes of monks and nuns in Larung Gar (Jesse Rockwell)



A stupa surrounded by houses (Jesse Rockwell)



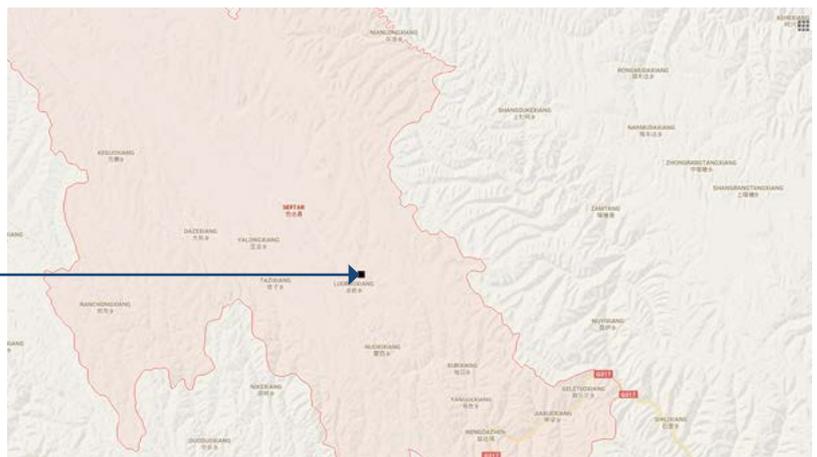
Tibet prior to the Chinese invasion in 1950



Tibet as divided by China. Kardze is located within the borders of Sichuan Province



The location of Larung Gar within Kardze and Serthar County



⁵ The first Dodrupchen Rinpoche, Dodrupchen Jikme Trinle Özer (1745-1821) was a spiritual teacher and founder of several monasteries in Tibet. He was recognised as the incarnation of the second son of the 8th Century Tibetan king Trisong Detsen. The first Dodrupchen Rinpoche is also regarded as the first in the Dodrupchen Incarnation Line, a lineage of highly respected religious teachers. The fourth Dodrupchen Rinpoche, Tubten Trinlé Pal Zangpo (born 1927), is one of the most important living masters in the Nyingma and Dzogchen Buddhist traditions.

⁶ Introduction to Larung Gar Five Sciences Buddhist Academy, Khenpo Sodargye Rinpoche
<http://www.khenposodargye.org/2013/03/introduction-to-larung-wuming-buddhist-institute/>

Previous demolitions at Larung Gar

Since the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet in 1950, Tibet's monasteries, nunneries and other religious institutions have been subject to state interference of varying severity. Tibetan Buddhist monasteries have been closed down or demolished, raided by security forces and put under state control, allowing them to remain open but tightly restricted by the authorities.

For the first two decades after its establishment, Larung Gar avoided these forms of state control and repression. However, in 1999, authorities ordered Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok to reduce his then 8,800 strong student population to the permitted number of 1,400. Following his refusal, authorities launched a large-scale crackdown in June 2001, sending 500 members of the People's Armed Police and the Public Security Bureau to Larung Gar to demolish buildings and evict residents. The operation resulted in the expulsion of 8,000 residents, including 1,500 foreign practitioners from countries including China, South Korea and Taiwan, and the destruction of nearly 2,000 residences and 2,000 meditation huts.⁷ Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok was forced to stop teaching at the institute and taken to a military hospital, where he was held incommunicado for over a year. He returned to the site in 2002, which was by then under heavy surveillance⁸ and later died in hospital in Chengdu in January 2004.

Another incursion took place in December 2002, when Chinese Public Security Bureau officers returned to Larung Gar to demolish reconstructed huts. Homes that had not been marked for demolition by authorities were also torn down. A group of over 200 resident monks confronted the officers, who responded by firing into the air with live ammunition.⁹ Several police vehicles were damaged in the confrontation, leading to the institute having to pay 70,000 Yuan in compensation. The institute was told that if the money was not paid, 200 monks and nuns would be arrested.¹⁰

There were further removals in 2013, when monks and nuns from central Tibet were removed from Larung Gar and sent back to their native areas. Some of those removed were given prison sentences ranging from one to six years. In 2015, another 1,000 people were ordered to leave, including elderly monks and nuns.¹¹



Monks in Larung Gar in 2016 (Jesse Rockwell)

⁷ China issues demolition order on world's largest religious town in Tibet, Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, 15 June 2016 <http://tchrd.org/china-issues-demolition-order-on-worlds-largest-religious-town-in-tibet/>

⁸ Chinese security forces attempt to demolish Larung Gar huts, International Campaign for Tibet, 27 December 2002 <https://www.savetibet.org/chinese-security-forces-attempt-to-demolish-larung-gar-huts/>

⁹ *Ibid.*

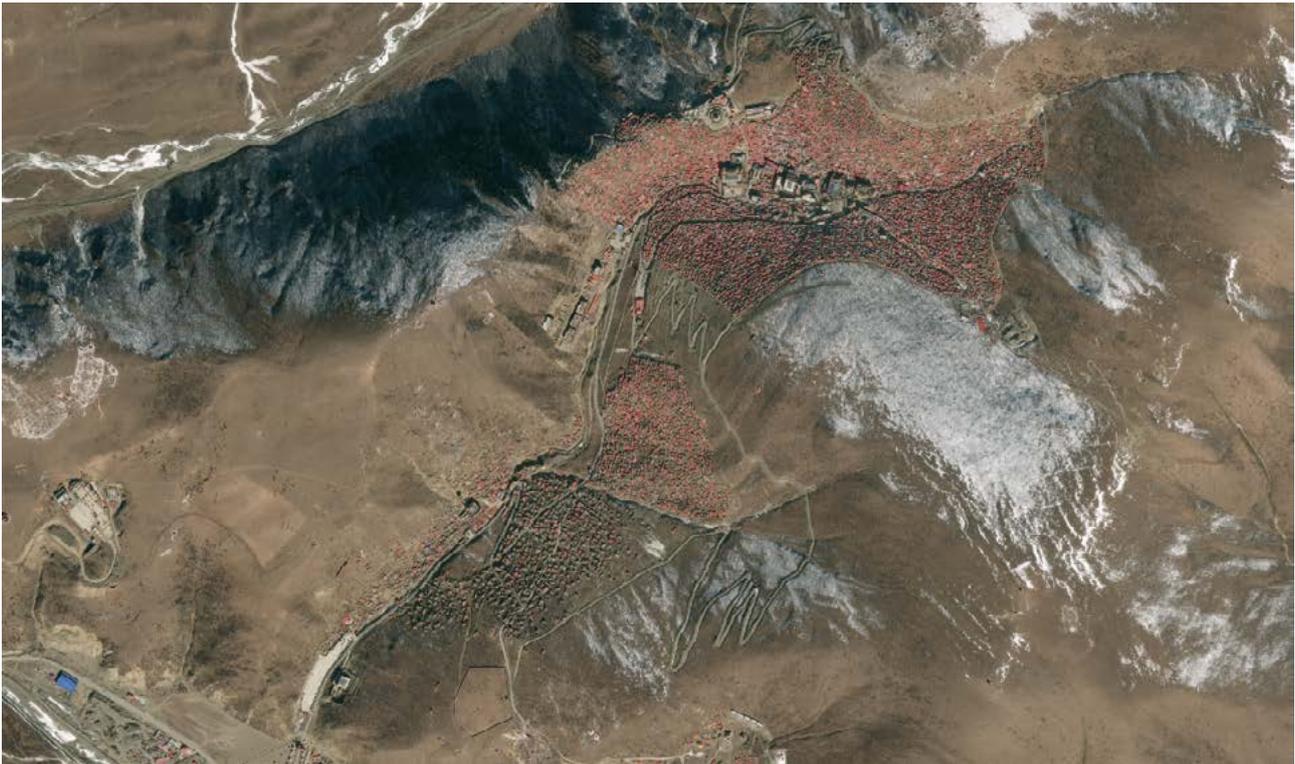
¹⁰ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, September 2017

¹¹ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, June 2016

Larung Gar in 2016

Over the years Larung Gar's population expanded, with official estimates in 2016 putting the number of residents at 10,000. Other sources, including residents, visitors and human rights organisations, estimated the number of people was at least 20,000 and possibly as high as 40,000.¹² The site expanded as residents constructed their own wooden homes in the valley and hills around Larung Gar's monastic institutions.

Satellite images of Larung Gar from January 2016 show an expansive site consisting of thousands of red houses spread throughout the valley. Although there is already evidence of building work on the outskirts of the site, and modern additions including car parks and an extensive road system, the images stand in stark contrast with the pictures and videos that would emerge from Larung Gar once demolitions began later that year.



Aerial view of Larung Gar shot in January 2016, showing the full extent of the site (Apollo Mapping)

The 2016 plan

In early June 2016, Serthar County authorities circulated an order entitled "Correction and rectification obligations for the Larung monastery Buddhist Institute in Serthar County", which laid out the plans for the 2016-2017 demolitions and forced removals at Larung Gar. The order, which was issued on behalf of the Chinese central government in Beijing¹³ stated that the number of residents at Larung Gar had to be reduced to 5,000 people by 30 September 2017, 3,500 of which were to be nuns with the remaining 1,500 being monks. It also decreed that the residences of those forced to leave were to be demolished, along with other buildings such as nuns' hostels and old people's homes.¹⁴

The schedule contained in the order gave residents little time to challenge it - a list of names of monks and nuns due to be expelled in 2016 was to be presented to the higher authorities by 15 June and 1,200 removals had to be completed by 20 October that year.¹⁵

¹² Information supplied by Tibet Watch, June 2016

¹³ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, June 2016

¹⁴ Serta County Order on Larung Gar Monastery, Human Rights Watch, 9 June 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/serta-county-order-larung-gar-monastery>

¹⁵ Ibid.

By 20 October, the plan also stipulated, “residences of those expelled since 2013, illegal new residences, residences that have become old age homes and nuns’ hostels, a total of 1,500 [buildings], [had to] be demolished.” To separate the residences of monks and nuns from those of lay practitioners, a gap had to be created, requiring further demolitions.¹⁶

The order also stipulated that Larung Gar’s internal affairs were to, effectively, be put under the control of CCP members. A management committee with both monks and officials was to be established with a “2+3 management approach”, in which CCP officials outnumbered monastic officials. The order specified that Larung Gar’s “management style” needed to be “in conformity with the management of a government-run school”. By August 2016, CCTV cameras were to be installed inside the site along with entry screening.¹⁷

The order set strict deadlines for each stage of the plan’s implementation and outlined penalties if these deadlines were not met. In one section it imposed additional, punitive removals of residents if targets were not met on time:

“The 5,000 overall limit must be managed by 2017. If it is discovered that it has not been done by September 30, 2017, the number of those to be expelled will be increased, in accord with the register of those present. The government will strictly check the numbers and residences of those being expelled.”¹⁸



Demolition in progress, July 2016



The aftermath of demolitions in Larung Gar in July 2016

Larung Gar’s residents and management were not consulted prior to the order being issued, despite a requirement under international law that the removal of people from their homes requires prior, informed consultation. Shortly after the order was issued, on 10 June, Hua Ke, a local party official, was quoted in local state media as claiming that the order was not designed to drive residents away, but was issued for their safety, to ease overcrowding and to reduce the risk of fire.¹⁹ This rationale has been used by Chinese government officials ever since.

Students at the monastery reacted to the order with a mixture of sadness and defiance. One Tibetan, a student at Larung Gar, told Tibet Watch: “We did not break any laws. We are not guilty of anything. We are sustaining our own way by abiding by self-responsibility and living a humble life. But when such lawless laws are forcefully bestowed on our head, we have no other option but to take some action”.²⁰

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ <http://www.ganzixinwen.com/wh/kzrw/zxj/n9662.html> (Chinese)

²⁰ Tibet Watch interview with student, name withheld, June 2016

Another student told Tibet Watch: “For our aspiration, at least we might have the right to raise a voice. Though we dare not die, we students in the campus must have the courage to make a cry for our own sake, for the Institute and for the great work of Lama Rinpoche [Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok]. My beloved fellows who are sharing the same situation, why can we not stand up and die for justice and for the future, when they are trampling on our heads though we did not commit any crimes?”²¹

The 2016 demolitions and removals

The demolitions began at 8am on 20 July 2016. Eyewitnesses describe a Chinese work team consisting of workers, local government officials, police and security forces, accompanied by digging teams, arriving at the site. Their tools included axes and chainsaws, as well as heavy machinery, such as diggers and bulldozers. They cordoned off areas of the site and began to carry out demolitions that would continue until winter 2016.

During this period, they also began to remove people who were not registered as being residents of Kardze TAP. Tibetans from the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) prefectures of Chamdo, Lhasa, Nagchu and Ngari were initially targeted, followed by monks and nuns from Gansu, Qinghai and Yunnan Provinces.²²

Residents removed from Larung Gar were put on coaches and driven to their native regions of Tibet, with those being returned to the TAR being driven over 1,000 miles away. In autumn 2016, video footage smuggled out of Larung Gar, and subsequently circulated on Tibetan social media, showed some of these removals taking place. In the footage, residents can be seen crying as those being removed are put on coaches and driven out of the site.



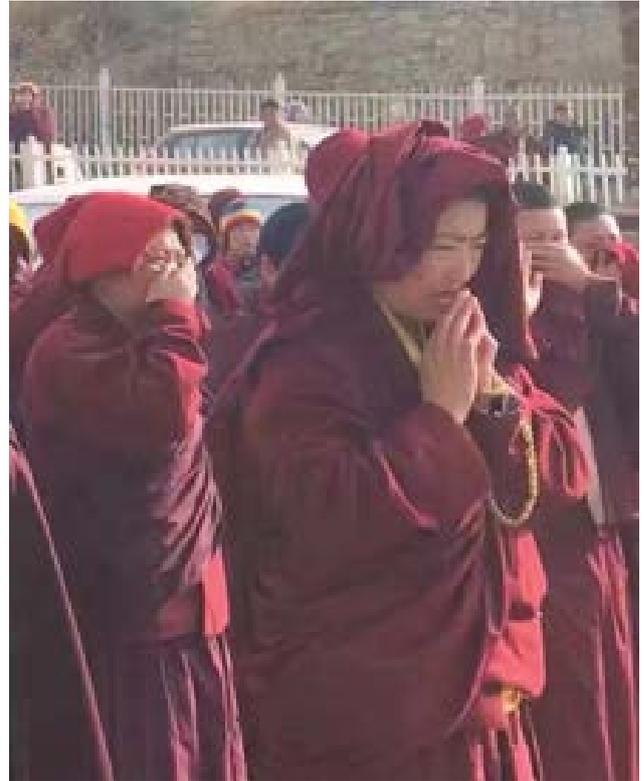
Buildings by the side of one of Larung Gar's main roads after demolition

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Report of six UN Special Rapporteurs in response to human rights concerns in Tibet (AL CHN 10/2016), Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 7 November 2016 <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=22816>, p.1*



Residents leaving Larung Gar with their possessions



Monks and nuns of Larung Gar praying and crying because of the forced evictions and demolitions of their homes in 2016

Residents who were removed from the site were made to fill in pledges with their name, identification number and thumb print, promising not to return to live there. Those being removed had to confirm that they would “extend support to the government’s policy on Larung Gar Buddhist Institute, voluntarily return home from Larung Gar Buddhist Institute, [and] not engage, organise and support any activities against the policy.” By signing the pledge, the departing resident also committed to “maintain[ing] unity among nationalities, social stability and not engage in any activities disrupting social stability and not spread rumours against the policy”.²³

Forced evictions

The removals of residents from Larung Gar meet the definition of ‘forced evictions’, a practice which is recognised under international law as a human rights violation. Forced evictions have been defined as “the permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection.”²⁴

Although it is permissible for a government to carry out evictions under international law, this must only be as a last resort. Genuine prior and informed consultations must first be carried out with those affected by the possibility of removal and all feasible alternatives should be explored. Authorities must also provide adequate and reasonable notice for those affected before evictions are scheduled, provide them with legal remedy and ensure that compensation is provided for the loss of property. Although forced evictions are recognised as a human rights violation in their own right, it is explicitly stipulated under international law that they must not be employed as a means of punishing residents, a threat made by Chinese authorities against the residents on several occasions.²⁵

²³ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, November 2016

²⁴ General Comment No. 7: The right to adequate housing (art. 11 (1) of the Covenant): Forced evictions, para 3 <http://www.refworld.org/docid/47a70799d.html>

²⁵ Ibid.



Nuns, monks and students leaving Larung Gar, under the order of the Chinese government, in 2016

The removals were accompanied by further degrading practices apparently designed to humiliate residents and force them to be compliant with the occupying Chinese regime. Monks and nuns who were returned to their native regions from Larung Gar were prevented from joining new monasteries and nunneries. Some were subjected to humiliating patriotic re-education sessions, in which they were required to sing Chinese propaganda songs and denounce their own Tibetan culture and religion. Footage from one of these sessions in Chamdo, in the TAR, shows nuns dressed in Chinese army uniforms singing a song in which they refer to China and Tibet as being “daughters of the same mother”. Another video, shot in Kongpo Gyamda in Nyingtri Prefecture in the TAR, shows 12 nuns who had recently been removed from Larung Gar performing a choreographed dance routine in their religious robes in front of an audience of Chinese officials while the Song of the Emancipated Serfs, a song celebrating the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, is played. According to Tibetan Buddhist teachings, monks and nuns are not permitted to sing or dance in their robes for non-religious purposes.

Not all evicted residents were removed from the area. According to reports in December 2016, more than 800 nuns were moved to a camp located in a neighbouring valley.²⁶ These reports are supported by satellite images showing rows of blue-roofed buildings one and a half kilometres north west of Larung Gar. Other residents received offers, conveyed by Larung Gar’s leadership, that they could continue their studies in Serthar County if they voluntarily left Larung Gar. On 23 September, 2,000 nuns, originally from Golog County and Yushu County in eastern Tibet, were asked to vacate their residences and leave Larung Gar within five days. In return, the Larung Gar authorities promised them that arrangements could be made for them to be transferred to other institutions in Serthar County or to institutions in the nearby counties of Nyagrunng, Dêgê and Draggio.²⁷



Aerial view of the nuns’ accommodation and view of the accommodation in relation to Larung Gar, April 2017 (Apollo Mapping)

Other, more direct, tactics were also employed to remove people. Around 300 monks, nuns and other residents were forced to leave Larung Gar without their personal belongings after returning from classes, prayers or running errands to find red, numbered padlocks on their doors. Authorities issued a warning that anyone found tampering with the locks would be heavily punished.

The removals were accompanied by interferences with the residents’ religious practices. In November 2016, authorities cancelled Dechen Shingdrub, an eight-day annual religious ceremony, in order to prevent any large

²⁶ Evicted nuns from Larung Gar held in camps, Phayul, 12 December 2016 <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=38421&t=1>

²⁷ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, October 2016

public gatherings of residents. Monks and nuns instead had to pray privately in their rooms.²⁸

This interference extended to the outskirts of Larung Gar. On a hillside to the southwest of Larung Gar, opposite the main entrance, is a Tibetan inscription, in recognition of Khenpo Jigme Phuntsok. At some point during the demolition programme, a Chinese propaganda slogan was added, emphasising the CCP's view that Tibet is inseparable from China with the words: "Together, let's build the Chinese dream" (同心共筑中国梦).



Images taken of Larung Gar's south west corner in January 2016 and April 2017, showing the addition of a Chinese propaganda slogan opposite the main entrance of the site (Apollo Mapping)

The demolitions paused in winter 2016 due to the inhospitable conditions. By December that year, an estimated 3,729 people had been evicted and at least 1,500 buildings had been destroyed, the vast majority of them nuns' residences.

The impact of the demolitions

The demolitions had a devastating effect on people across Tibet, as well as the residents themselves. One resident likened the demolitions to "destroying heaven". Another seized on the authorities' claim that the demolitions were being carried out to prevent overcrowding, remarking that such measures would never be applied to Chinese cities.

Inside Larung Gar, residents were advised by the senior abbots to remain calm and not to protest the demolitions. Nevertheless, the residents' sadness, expressed through social media and messages to the outside world, was palpable. The despair was poignantly expressed by three nuns, who committed suicide in summer 2016 in protest against the demolitions. Rinzin Dolma, who took her own life on 20 July 2016, left a note saying she could not "bear the pain of the endless Chinese harassment of innocent Buddhists who quietly studied at the institute". Another nun, Tsering Dolma, hanged herself on 19 August. In her note, she stated: "I am very sad because the Chinese government does not give freedom to even study religion. Small quarters (of monks and nuns) were also demolished. I would be happier to die."²⁹

The 2017 demolitions and removals

Although the Serthar County order and statements by Chinese authorities made it clear that demolitions would resume in 2017, it was initially unclear when they would be restarted and how many people and homes would be affected. Although authorities issued an order in January 2017 requiring that 4,320 homes be destroyed, new orders were issued on 12 March 2017, lowering this number to 3,225 homes. The March order stated that these demolitions were to be carried out by 30 April. The monastic administration at Larung Gar was told that this number could not be further reduced and that the entire site would be destroyed if there was negative behaviour or any lack of cooperation.³⁰

In March 2017, one resident sent a message via an intermediary to Free Tibet, stating that 700 Chinese workers were at the site and preparing to carry out more demolitions.³¹ The following month, 250 monks and nuns

²⁸ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, November 2016

²⁹ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, August 2017

³⁰ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, March 2017

³¹ Anonymous nun, April 2017

who came from areas of Tibet in China's Qinghai Province were evicted. By the end of May 2017, just under a year after the initial order was released, 4,828 people had been removed and 4,725 buildings torn down³².



A home is marked for demolition, March 2017 (Charles Tay)

Those whose homes were destroyed had been promised compensation for the destroyed houses, although according to the same resident, nobody they knew had at that point received any money.³³ According to this source, households had been offered compensation of RMB 30,000 (£3,500 or USD \$4,300) to share between residents of the building, significantly less than the value of each home, which they put at around 70,000 – RMB 80,000 RMB (£8,000 - £9,200, or USD \$10,000 - \$16,000).³⁴ One nun spoken to by the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) confirmed that she had received RMB 30,000 (£3,500 or USD \$4,500) after her two-storey home was destroyed. The home had cost her and her family RMB 150,000 (£17,000 or USD \$22,700) to build. The nun, who came to Larung Gar from Drango County in Kardze nearly three decades ago, said she was now living in a borrowed house in the valley. She had been ordered to leave after the demolition of her home and feared that she would be returned to Drango County or arrested if caught.³⁵

Administrative changes were also implemented. In August 2017, state media announced that CCP members had been incorporated into Larung Gar's management. Three CCP officials, Dhakpa, Dhondup Tashi and Lokhang Pun, were assigned to manage Larung Gar Buddhist Institute, while Dhargay Tashi Tsering, Sonam Choephel and Sonam Yangzom, were appointed to head the Larung Gar Monastery Management Committee (MMC). The appointment of the party members was in line with the June 2016 order,³⁶ section 7.4 of which

³² *Undercover in Larung Gar: A year after demolition, world's largest Tibetan Buddhist institute sliced like a melon*, TCHRD, 11 August 2017 [tchrd.org/undercover-in-larung-gar-a-year-after-demolition-worlds-largest-tibetan-buddhist-institute-sliced-like-a-melon](https://www.tchrd.org/undercover-in-larung-gar-a-year-after-demolition-worlds-largest-tibetan-buddhist-institute-sliced-like-a-melon)

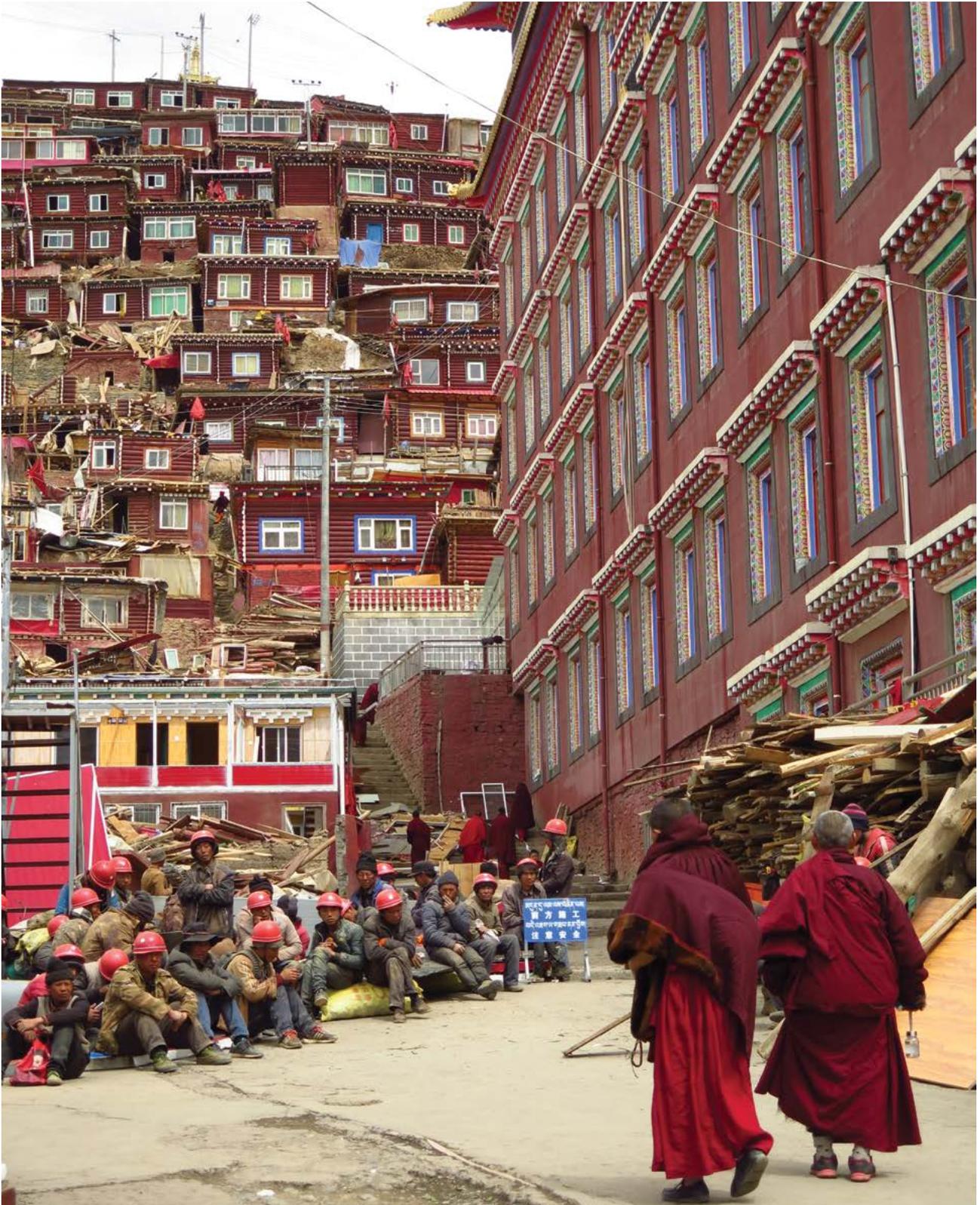
³³ *Anonymous nun*, April 2017

³⁴ *Anonymous nun*, April 2017

³⁵ *Undercover in Larung Gar: A year after demolition, world's largest Tibetan Buddhist institute sliced like a melon*, TCHRD, 11 August 2017 <https://www.tchrd.org/undercover-in-larung-gar-a-year-after-demolition-worlds-largest-tibetan-buddhist-institute-sliced-like-a-melon/>

³⁶ *Serta County Order on Larung Gar Monastery*, Human Rights Watch, 9 June 2016 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/06/09/serta-county-order-larung-gar-monastery>

stated: "In terms of management, the monastery needs to be managed by both lay officials and monks, while the institute's management style needs to be in conformity with the management of a government-run school. A management committee with both monks and officials must be established. In the manner of taking seven steps forward, a 2+3 management approach should be practically implemented."³⁷



Demolition of houses in Larung Gar in 2017 / Chinese workers and religious Tibetans in Larung Gar in 2017 (Charles Tay)

³⁷ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, August 2017

Tourism

The demolitions at Larung Gar took place against the backdrop of a sharp increase in Chinese tourism to Tibet. According to official Chinese figures, 23 million people visited Tibet in 2016,³⁸ compared to the 8.5 million tourists who visited five years earlier.³⁹ Infrastructure projects have taken place across Tibet to facilitate tourism, including the construction of a second railway line connecting Tibet to Chinese cities.

This growing tourist infrastructure is mirrored in and around Larung Gar. During early 2017, information received by Free Tibet from Larung Gar indicated that some of the works being carried out at the site were geared towards accommodating tourists. One eyewitness describes more than a hundred Chinese tourists walking freely around the site, despite demolitions taking place in other parts of Larung Gar. The eyewitness, who gained access to Larung Gar by pretending to be a Chinese tourist, also noted the construction of large hotels in Serthar Town, the nearest urban area, 15 kilometres away, with resources at the hotels including oxygen supplies to help tourists acclimatise to the altitude. These findings were corroborated by a resident nun at Larung Gar, whose home had already been torn down, who wrote: "I don't know how long I will be able to deal [with this]. You need to take action quickly, otherwise [Larung Gar] will become a tourist attraction".⁴⁰ Tibetans living around Larung Gar have been told to move as space was needed for gardens around the site.⁴¹



Demolished houses creating a passageway, March 2017 (Charles Tay)

TCHRD sources who managed to enter Larung Gar in July 2017 noted that houses were being cleared to make space for tourism infrastructure, including wide staircases with railings to allow easier access to the monastic buildings on the hills around the site. Dirt roads at the top of the hill have been covered in tarmac and another road has been built at the top of the valley that would allow tourists to drive to the top of the site and take photos, where once they would have had to walk.⁴² One source, a Chinese Buddhist, who spoke to TCHRD, said: "The government is using the excuse of building roads and improving the infrastructure to demolish houses. They just want to reduce the number of people here."⁴³

³⁸ *Tibet receives 23 million tourists in 2016, China Daily, 3 January 2017* http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/travel/2017-01/03/content_27848308.htm

³⁹ *Tibet receives 8.43m tourists in 11 months, China Daily, 26 December 2011* http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2011-12/26/content_14330921.htm

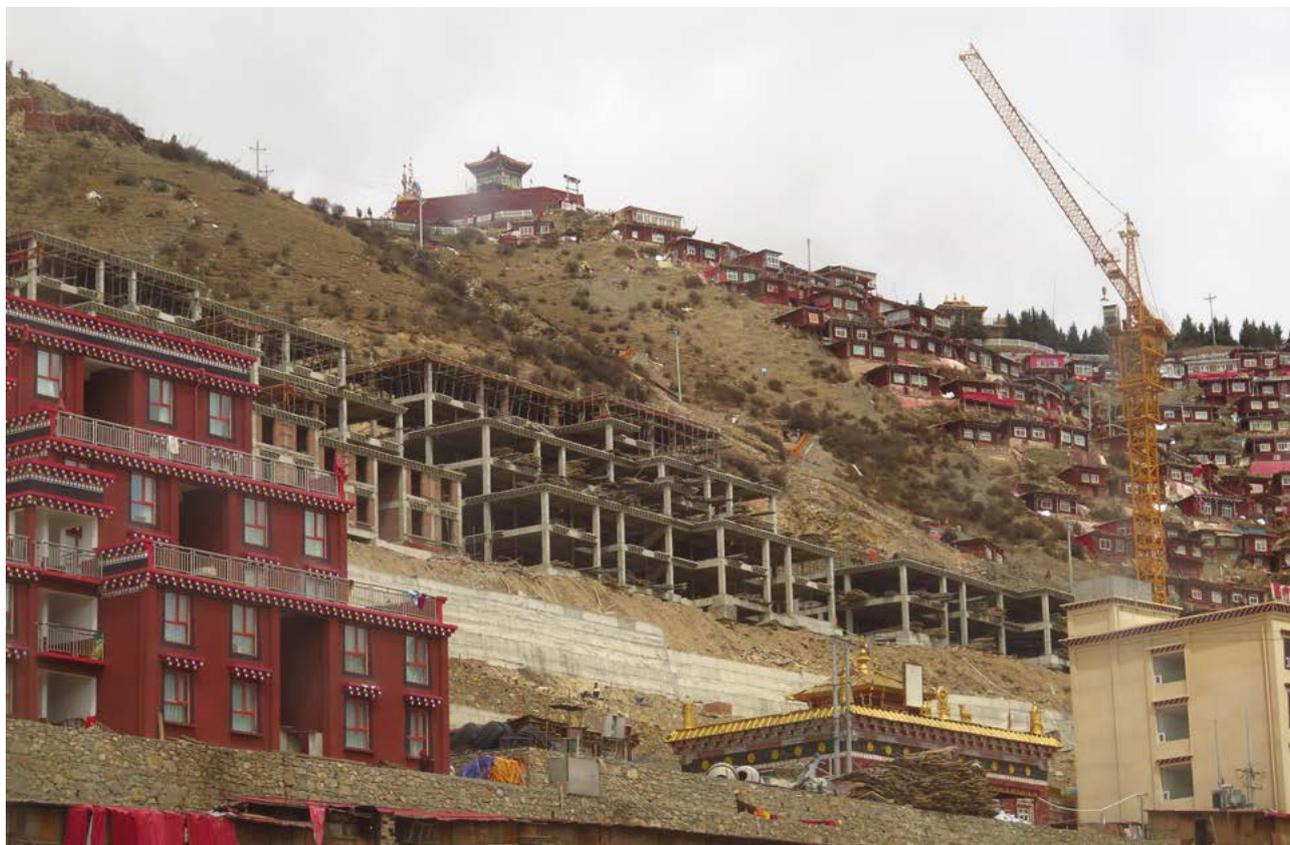
⁴⁰ *Anonymous nun, April 2017*

⁴¹ *Information supplied by Tibet Watch, April 2017*

⁴² *Undercover in Larung Gar: A year after demolition, world's largest Tibetan Buddhist institute sliced like a melon, TCHRD, 11 August 2017* tchrd.org/undercover-in-larung-gar-a-year-after-demolition-worlds-largest-tibetan-buddhist-institute-sliced-like-a-melon

⁴³ *Ibid.*

Photos from within Larung Gar in 2017 show concrete structures being erected near to the ruins of old houses. According to TCHRD sources, a couple of large hotels can already be seen close to the main complex of temples in the centre of Larung Gar. Satellite images show extensive development in the southeast and southwest corners of the site, with rows of buildings under construction along the main road leading into Larung Gar.



Buildings under construction in the centre of Larung Gar in 2017 (Charles Tay)



Signs of construction in the southeast corner of the Larung Gar and on the road to the site from the main entrance (Apollo Mapping)

Those who managed to enter Larung Gar had to navigate or circumvent checkpoints at the site and on the road from nearby Serthar Town. Eyewitnesses reported foreign visitors being turned away from these checkpoints but those with Chinese identification documents were allowed to pass. An indication of the number of tourists visiting Larung Gar was provided in an announcement from Serthar County Tourism Office on 26 April, which temporarily limited visitors to Larung Gar to 1,000 per day until 15 May.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Information supplied by Tibet Watch, April 2017

Cataloguing the destruction

The most comprehensive overview of the scale of the destruction at Larung Gar can be seen through satellite images. Working with US satellite specialists Apollo Mapping, we used before and after satellite images to locate the areas of Larung Gar affected by the destruction.

We used images of the exact same locations taken in January 2016 and April 2017. This first comparison, using pictures from the centre of Larung Gar, where the largest temples are located, gives some indication of how comprehensive but also spread out the demolitions have been. Existing roads running through Larung Gar have been widened through the demolition of houses. Buildings have also been torn down, possibly to create space for new roads to connect religious sites higher up the side of the hill with main roads. Spaces around temples have been cleared by removing houses next to them.



Apollo Mapping

New avenues have also been created on the south side of the site by demolishing houses.



Apollo Mapping

A particularly drastic series of demolitions has been carried out on the southwest side of Larung Gar. A community of houses along the main road into the site has been more than cut in half.



Apollo Mapping

Demolitions were carried out across the whole of the site, but a persistent theme was the destruction of homes that were next to main roads. In this 2016 image of the eastern side of the site, an island of homes can be seen running diagonally from the top left corner with a road running either side. In the 2017 photo a substantial number of these houses are gone.



Apollo Mapping

In these images, the main road running from the monastic complexes in the centre to the northeast corner of Larung Gar has also visibly widened as a result of homes being torn down.



Apollo Mapping

To the north of the site, further clusters of homes have been removed. The homes were towards the edge of Larung Gar, in a substantially less built-up area of the site and, in some cases, separated from the site by a main road. It is particularly implausible that these demolitions were motivated by fire safety or fears of overcrowding.



Apollo Mapping

Conclusion

As the findings in this report have demonstrated, the measures taken by the Chinese authorities to cut down the size of Larung Gar have had little to do with concerns over the safety of the residents and, in their execution, were actively damaging. Far from being a consultative process in which the residents' concerns were heard and their needs addressed, the demolitions and removals relied on coercion, including threats of collective punishment such as tearing the entire site down. Residents appear to have lost money through the inadequate, or entire lack of, compensation for their homes and were not consulted about where they would be relocated to, instead being forcibly driven out of Larung Gar to their native regions.

The Chinese government is required under international law to protect and respect the right to adequate housing that the residents of Larung Gar possess. Instead, these rights have repeatedly been flouted through the use of forced evictions.

These forced evictions have been compounded by the cruel treatment inflicted on residents who have been removed. Former residents have been humiliated in patriotic re-education sessions or by being forced to perform for Chinese audiences. Those who have been returned to their regions of registration have, in many cases, been prevented from moving into new monasteries.

Rather than being aimed at improving the well-being of the residents, the rush to force them out of Larung Gar and carry out demolitions instead appears to be motivated by a desire on the part of the Chinese authorities to reduce the power of an influential and well-respected Buddhist institution. Larung Gar, located in a restive region of Tibet, has come to be seen as an alternative source of authority to Chinese rule and as a result has suffered from state interference and repression, in line with the CCP's wider policies of restricting freedom of religion in Tibet.

Furthermore, the push to make Larung Gar more accessible to tourists, at the expense of the needs of its residents, reflects a wider policy on the part of Beijing to exploit Tibet's rich culture as a means of growing its tourist industry, even as the locals who have developed and still practice this culture are made to suffer.

The demolitions, forced removals and cruel treatment of Larung Gar's residents has received some strong international criticism, which has been welcomed by Tibetans. This international pressure, which has largely come from international bodies like the United Nations and European Union, will need to intensify and come from governments themselves if it is to convince Beijing to desist from further harm to Larung Gar and its residents. China has already stepped up removals in other Buddhist sites, such as Yarchen Gar in eastern Tibet. For the sake of these sites, as well as Larung Gar, international pressure must be swift and concerted.

Appendix

China's human rights obligations

China's activities in occupied Tibet are regulated by both Chinese domestic law, such as its constitution, and also by international human rights law. China, like other countries around the world, has signed up to a range of instruments to protect the human rights of everyone living under its rule and, as a result, is bound to respect, protect and fulfil those rights.

A more detailed breakdown of these obligations will follow. In brief, under both domestic and international law, China is obliged to protect the rights of those living at Larung Gar to adequate and secure housing, to halt the demolitions and forced removal of Larung Gar's residents, to desist from interfering with the monastery leadership and to protect the rights of Tibetans to freely practice their religion without fear of coercion or intimidation.

The right to adequate housing

The right to adequate housing is enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by China in 2001. Article 11.1. of the Covenant commits China to recognising "the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions."⁴⁵

This is expanded upon in General Comment No. 4 on Article 11.1 of the Covenant, which states that the right to housing "should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity."⁴⁶

The practice of forced evictions was recognised as a "gross violation of human rights" by the Commission on Human Rights, which, in Resolution 1993/77 on Forced Evictions, urged governments "to undertake immediate measures, at all levels, aimed at eliminating the practice of forced eviction" and to "confer legal security of tenure on all persons currently threatened with forced eviction and to adopt all necessary measures giving full protection against forced eviction, based upon effective participation, consultation and negotiation with affected persons or groups."⁴⁷

Freedom of association and assembly

China's attempts to block evicted residents from returning to Larung Gar violates Article 13 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that "everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state." These restrictions, along with the enforced cancellation of prayer ceremonies at the site also violate Tibetans' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association under Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁴⁸ The subsequent restrictions imposed on former residents from being able to practice at Larung Gar or joining new monasteries are also in violation of these rights, along with Article 27 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which specifies that "everyone has the right to take part in cultural life and to the freedom indispensable for creative activity".⁴⁹

Freedom of religion

The demolitions at Larung Gar, removal of residents and interference with the site's religious ceremonies, management and permitted activities also constitute a violation of Tibetans' rights to freedom of religion.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China states that "citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief" and that "[n]o State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion."⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11.1*

⁴⁶ *General Comment No. 4: The right to adequate housing (art. 11 (1) of the Covenant) (1991), para 7*

⁴⁷ *Commission on Human Rights in resolution 1993/77 on Forced Evictions (1993), paras 1-3*

⁴⁸ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13.1, Article 20.1* <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights>

⁴⁹ *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 27*

⁵⁰ *Constitution of the People's Republic of China (Full text after amendment on 14 March 14 2004), Article 36* http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/2007-11/15/content_1372964.htm



*Monk praying during a sky burial at Larung Gar in 2016
(Jesse Rockwell)*

The right of Tibetans to peacefully practice their religion without fear of discrimination, intimidation or coercion is also enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to [...] either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”⁵¹

The General Assembly 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief stipulates that “the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief “includes the rights to “worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes” and “[t]o teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes.”⁵²

Regarding the destruction of buildings at Larung Gar, Human Rights Council resolution 6/37 of 1981 urges states “to exert the utmost efforts, in accordance with their national legislation and in conformity with international human rights and humanitarian law, to ensure that religious places, sites, shrines and symbols are fully respected and protected and to take additional measures in cases where they are vulnerable to desecration or destruction”.⁵³

Regarding the changes imposed by China on Larung Gar’s monastic leadership, the aforementioned General Assembly 1981 Declaration on the Elimination

of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief specifies that the right to freedom of religion must include the right to “train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13.1, Article 20.1 <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights>

⁵² Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Articles 6(a), 6 (e) <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ReligionOrBelief.aspx>

⁵³ Human Rights Council Resolution 6/37. Elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief, Article 9(e) http://ap.ohchr.org/Documents/E/HRC/resolutions/A_HRC_RES_6_37.pdf

⁵⁴ Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, Article 6(g) <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ReligionOrBelief.aspx>



About Free Tibet

Free Tibet is a London-based international campaign organisation. Our vision is a free Tibet in which Tibetans are able to determine their own future and the human rights of all are respected. We campaign for an end to China's occupation of Tibet and for international recognition of Tibetans' right to freedom.



About Tibet Watch

Tibet Watch works to promote the human rights of the Tibetan people through monitoring, research and advocacy. We are a UK registered charity with an office in London and a field office in Dharamsala, India. We believe in the power of bearing witness, the power of truth.