

# Nothing has changed in Tibet: New US Department of State report confirms

Washington DC — "People's Republic of China (PRC) government systematically impeded travel to the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan areas outside the TAR for U.S. diplomats and officials, journalists, and tourists in 2019," the US Department of State said in its second annual report, recently submitted to Congress under Section 4 of the Reciprocal Access to Tibet Act.

"Regarding the level of access Chinese authorities granted to U.S. diplomats and officials, journalists, and tourists to Tibetan areas in China; a comparison with the level of access granted to other areas of China; a comparison between the levels of access to Tibetan and non-Tibetan areas in relevant provinces; a comparison of the level of access compared to the previous reporting year; and a description of the required permits and other measures that impede travel in Tibetan areas," the report said.

"The central government required all international visitors to apply for a Tibet travel permit to visit the TAR and regularly denied requests by international journalists, diplomats, and other officials for official travel," the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, the US Department of State said in the report.

The report says "Approval for tourist travel to the TAR was easier to secure but often restricted around sensitive dates. U.S. official visits to the TAR, when permitted, were highly restricted. Travel to Tibetan areas outside of the TAR did not require a permit or, for diplomats and officials, additional prior notification by diplomatic note for specific meetings in Tibetan areas."

"However, requests to meet with government, religious, and civil society leaders in these areas were routinely denied. PRC security forces used conspicuous monitoring to intimidate U.S. diplomats and officials, followed them at all times, prevented them from meeting or speaking with local contacts, harassed them, and restricted their movement in these areas. Tibetan-Americans regularly faced restrictions on their travel to Tibetan areas. Journalist access to these areas remained restricted and limited," the report stresses.

"In 2019, the TAR continued to be the only area of China for which the PRC government required diplomats and other foreign officials to request permission to visit. Diplomats could not purchase air or train tickets to the TAR without official approval. Chinese security personnel scrutinized vehicle passengers to

ensure they had approved travel permits. In 2019, the PRC government denied five of ten official requests from the U.S. diplomatic mission in China to visit the TAR, including a request for the deputy chief of mission, the defense attaché, the Agricultural Trade Office, and two requests by the U.S. citizen Services unit at the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu," it reads.

The report says, the "PRC government regulated travel of international visitors to the TAR for tourism, a restriction applied by no other provincial-level entity in China. In accordance with a 1989 central government regulation, international visitors, including U.S. citizens, were required to obtain an official confirmation letter issued by the TAR government, which reports to the central government in Beijing, before entering the TAR. The PRC government mandated a designated tour guide had to accompany international tourists while in the TAR. Authorities denied access to the TAR for many international tourists during periods the PRC government considered politically sensitive, including the March anniversary of the 1959 Tibetan Uprising against China's invasion of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's birthday in July."

The report also says "Each year the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu requests U.S. tourist numbers for the TAR from PRC authorities. The PRC government has not provided official data for 2019. The consulate estimates roughly 10,000 U.S. citizens visited the region in 2019, which is similar to the number of visitors in 2018. The TAR government announced 40 million tourists from all countries visited the region in 2019, up from 30 million in 2018, but there is no evidence to show a substantial increase in American tourists."

According to U.S. embassy and consulate contacts, as well as media reports, "Tibetan-Americans, when applying for Chinese visas at PRC embassies, continued to undergo a strict screening process different from that of other U.S. citizens. Tibetan-Americans reported more frequent harassment by security officials in Tibetan areas than in other parts of China. Members of the Tibetan-American community reported they self-censored their behavior in the United States out of fear of retribution against their family members in Tibet or fear of losing future access to Tibet. The U.S. government received several reports of instances in which Chinese authorities denied entry into China of Tibetan-Americans in 2019, despite these U.S. citizens possessing valid Chinese visas and travel documents."

The report added that "Chinese regulations did not require international journalists to obtain prior permission to travel to any part of the country except for the TAR. The PRC government heavily restricted and controlled access for U.S. journalists to the TAR and directly threatened to expel U.S. journalists reporting on developments in the TAR. The PRC government rarely granted requests from

international journalists to visit the TAR and, when it did, the government severely limited the scope of reporting."

"Chinese security officials monitored and controlled these journalists' movements at all times. The PRC government rejected the vast majority of U.S. journalists' requests to visit and report from the TAR, according to data compiled by the Foreign Correspondents' Club of China (FCCC), the professional organization for the international press corps based in China. The FCCC's 2019 annual report stated that nine out of 10 journalists who requested to report from Tibetan-inhabited areas were told reporting was either restricted or prohibited," it said, adding: "The FCCC's 2018 annual report stated that coverage from "Tibet proper remains off-limits to foreign journalists."

"When U.S. journalists gained access to Tibetan areas, the PRC government further suppressed their ability to report about Tibet by intimidating and preventing its own citizens from interacting with the foreign press. In August 2019, the government denied imprisoned Tibetan language activist Tashi Wangchuk access to his lawyers and refused his requests for appeal. Wangchuk was sentenced in 2018 to five years in prison for "inciting separatism" after he appeared in a New York Times documentary calling for linguistic and cultural rights in Tibet. Under social media laws implemented by the TAR government in 2019, Tibetans can be imprisoned for "inappropriate communication," particularly with foreigners," it continued.

"The PRC government permitted U.S. diplomats and other officials to travel to Tibetan areas outside of the TAR without submitting diplomatic notes, though official meetings with local government, religious, and community leaders required local FAO permission. Chinese security personnel used conspicuous monitoring to intimidate those traveling to both the TAR and Tibetan areas outside of the TAR. Government-designated minders followed diplomats and officials, prevented them from meeting or speaking with local contacts, questioned them, and restricted their movement.

Official access to monasteries in Tibetan areas of Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) TAP in Sichuan province and Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) TAP in Sichuan province remained restricted. Consular officials at the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu who traveled to Tibetan areas in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces required significant advance approval to secure official meetings with local government officials and religious leaders. Sichuan provincial officials denied most of these requests."

During visits to Tibetan areas in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, local authorities prohibited U.S. diplomats from entering certain monasteries, blocked off specific

roads, prevented them from having meetings or conversations, and monitored their conversations. In 2019, the U.S. consul general in Chengdu repeatedly requested to meet with leaders of the monasteries of Larung Gar and Yachen Gar in Sichuan province, but these requests were denied. Contacts reported police have increased security around Kirti Monastery in Ngaba TAP and checked cars to prevent foreigners from entering. Comparable non-Tibetan religious and cultural sites do not have these restrictions and security measures."

It states that "International tourists sometimes faced restrictions traveling to Tibetan areas outside the TAR. U.S. tourists reported authorities also regularly denied tourist access to the TAR during periods the PRC government considered politically sensitive. U.S. business representatives and other U.S. citizens reported increased monitoring and harassment from security officials while traveling in Tibetan areas outside the TAR. In 2019, local officials in Kangding, Kardze TAP required a long-time U.S. resident and hostel owner to sell his business and leave the area within one month."

"Although journalists were permitted to travel to areas outside the TAR with significant Tibetan populations, they were subjected to arbitrary and invasive surveillance, physically blocked from certain areas, and intimidated by the government. According to the FCCC's 2019 annual report, PRC government officials informed most journalists requesting to report from Tibetan-inhabited areas that reporting was "restricted or prohibited." Such restrictions were also noted in the 2018 FCCC report.

According to the 2018 FCCC report, authorities told two of the four international correspondents in the survey who tried to report on Tibetan areas outside the TAR their reporting was restricted or prohibited. The 2019 FCCC report stated nine of 10 international correspondents were told reporting from Tibetan-inhabited areas was restricted or prohibited.

Access to the Tibetan population of the PRC did not improve in 2019 compared to 2018. While TAR officials permitted the first U.S. diplomatic reporting trip to Ngari prefecture since at least 2013 and slightly increased the total number of visits to the TAR, official chaperones and security personnel prevented U.S. diplomats from fully engaging with Tibetan residents. Restrictions in Tibetan areas of Sichuan province, while less conspicuous, were equally pervasive."

"In March 2019, several Tibetan invitees to a lunch hosted by the U.S. consul general in Chengdu were stopped by security officials and prevented from attending, with one security official categorizing the lunch as an "inappropriate and illegal activity" and another threatening an invitee's employment. Attempts to

speaking with locals in the TAR and in Tibetan areas of Sichuan province were quickly broken up by security officials.

These actions were consistent with the procedures of prior years, including 2018, when security personnel removed contacts and locals from their residences or monasteries before diplomats arrived. Tibetans who interacted with U.S. diplomats afterward reported questioning and harassment by security officials. Cultural events and outreach to Tibetans by U.S. diplomats experienced frequent government objections to content and forced changes of venue.

The FCCC's 2019 annual report noted only nine international journalists applied for permission to visit Tibetan areas in 2019. The 2018 report noted only seven international journalists applied for permission.

In addition to the permits and other restrictions discussed above, visitors whose requests for a Tibet travel permit were approved by the PRC government faced additional access barriers once in the TAR. According to travel agents operating in the TAR, the Tibet travel permit did not allow visits to all areas. Some areas were generally closed to visitors and required an additional alien travel permit from the TAR Public Security Bureau. Tourists planning to visit certain border areas also required a military area entry permit from the Military Affairs Office and a foreign-affairs permit from the TAR FAO.

The PRC government did not disclose its decision-making process for granting permission to travel to the TAR, nor did it share the names of officials involved in issuing travel permits to U.S. citizens to visit the TAR. The U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu observed political and economic reporting officers' requests for travel appeared to face greater scrutiny and were more often subject to rejection or delay than requests for consular access.

Chinese authorities assessed each U.S. official request to visit the TAR on a case-by-case basis. The TAR FAO generally required a diplomatic note for any official visit, accompanied by a detailed day-by-day agenda and list of trip attendees. Once the TAR government received the request, it reportedly informed a foreign affairs leading committee, consisting of representatives at the prefectural, provincial, and central levels from the United Front Work Department, Ministry of State Security, Ministry of Public Security, People's Liberation Army, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

This committee reviewed the request and then instructed the TAR FAO to provide the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu with a formal response. This process typically took at least one month. In the interim, U.S. officials typically made dozens of calls to the TAR FAO to inquire about the status of the request.

The TAR FAO did not provide a timeline for a decision and typically conveyed a verbal approval or rejection two or three days before the planned travel. The TAR FAO instructed U.S. diplomats to request approval from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the U.S. Ambassador's trip and from the Central Military Commission Office for International Military Cooperation for a travel request by the U.S. Embassy in Beijing Defense Attaché.

The TAR FAO required official U.S. visitors to adhere to an agenda the FAO planned but typically did not provide the U.S. Consulate General in Chengdu with that agenda until arrival in the TAR. The PRC government required U.S. officials to travel in FAO-arranged vehicles with FAO-hired drivers and sometimes selected lodging for U.S. officials. The FAO did not allow U.S. officials to add engagements to their trips, during which large contingents of Chinese security personnel followed U.S. officials at all times. During a trip to the TAR in October 2019, U.S. diplomats were accompanied by between two to five government officials at all times, with additional security personnel following them. Security officials were conspicuously present during hotel stays in the TAR, preventing any unescorted travel in the region.

In July 2015, the Governor of Kardze TAP in Sichuan Province assured the consul general in Chengdu international diplomats were free to travel to all areas of the prefecture. The consul general subsequently confirmed that statement with a senior official at the Sichuan FAO, who confirmed the Chinese government, had formally lifted all past restrictions on travel by diplomats to Kardze and Ngaba TAPs. Despite this reassurance, local authorities in Kardze and Ngaba detained and interrogated U.S. diplomats on at least two occasions in 2017 and 2018.

In 2019, authorities did not approve any requests for official meetings in Kardze, and U.S. diplomats traveling in Kardze were subject to heavy scrutiny, harassment, and interference by security officials, effectively limiting their access to the region and its inhabitants. Similar conditions existed in Ngaba TAP. U.S. diplomats were not detained in 2019. Consulate employees traveling in these areas were often stopped, questioned, pressured, or harassed by security officials.