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## **30 Years of the Enforced Disappearance of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama - A Briefing Note**

**Objective:** Call for solidarity to pressure the government of the People's Republic of China to release the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama and respect Tibetans' right to freedom of religion

**Background:** On 17 May 1995, six-year-old Gedhun Choekyi Nyima was kidnapped by the Chinese authorities, three days after being recognized as the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama. Along with him, his parents, brother, and Chadrel Rinpoche were abducted as well. For thirty years now, the Chinese government has refused to divulge any information on their whereabouts and well-being with the exception of a few vague and unverifiable statements. After His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama is one of the most important figures in Tibetan Buddhism. His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama were contemporaries during the build-up to the Chinese invasion. After His Holiness the Dalai Lama was forced to escape into exile in 1959, the 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama became the face of Tibetan leadership inside Tibet. In 1962, he submitted the 70,000 Character Petition, a well-reasoned criticism of Mao's policies in Tibet, which resulted in him being sentenced to fourteen years in detention. The 10<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama passed away on 28 January 1989 under mysterious circumstances which gave Chinese government the perfect opportunity to cement their rule and install a Panchen Lama who they could directly control and manipulate. But for Tibetans, only a Panchen Lama recognized by His Holiness the Dalai Lama would gain their trust and respect.

**Issue Analysis: The Enforced Disappearance of Tibet's 11th Panchen Lama**  
The abduction and enforced disappearance of Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, recognized as the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1995, represents one of the world's longest-running cases of enforced disappearance. Shortly after his recognition at age six, Chinese authorities took him and his family into custody, and their whereabouts have remained largely unknown to the international community for nearly three decades. This action constitutes an enforced disappearance under international law as defined in the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. As a minor at the time of his disappearance, the Panchen Lama's case involves serious violations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which China ratified in 1992, including rights not to be separated from parents against their will, freedom of thought and religion, privacy, and protection from arbitrary detention.

China's abduction of Panchen Lama also carries profound implications for Tibetan Buddhism, where the Panchen Lama holds immense religious importance as the second-highest spiritual authority after His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Traditionally, these two figures participate in recognizing each other's reincarnations, maintaining a centuries-old spiritual lineage. The PRC's calculation is clear: this is to one day recognise the reincarnation of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama controlled by the PRC authorities. The Chinese government's intervention directly disrupts this religious succession process, demonstrating an attempt to control religious leadership from

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outside the faith tradition. It undermines Tibetan Buddhist autonomy, violates religious freedom under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and denies Tibetans their right to cultural and religious self-determination.

China has, time and again, maintained that Gedhun Choekyi Nyima is living a “normal life” but has consistently refused to disclose his location, allow independent verification of his wellbeing, or permit meetings with international observers or UN representatives. Instead, China appointed another child, Gyaincain Norbu, as the Panchen Lama who serves primarily as a political instrument of the CCP, lacking legitimate religious authority within traditional Tibetan Buddhist structures. His religious activities and public statements consistently align with state policies rather than autonomous spiritual leadership expected of a Panchen Lama.

As of 2024, multiple human rights bodies have raised concerns about this case, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, and various parliamentary bodies and national governments, yet no independent verification of the Panchen Lama’s status has been permitted. The continued detention represents an ongoing human rights violation that has persisted despite international pressure, highlighting both the severity of the case and the challenges in enforcing international human rights norms when confronted with state sovereignty claims.

### **Recommendations:**

- a. Release information on the whereabouts of the 11<sup>th</sup> Panchen Lama Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, grant independent access to him, and allow him to exercise his right to freedom of movement
- b. The international community should therefore double its efforts to safeguard the rights of the Tibetans to choose a future Dalai Lama without interference by the Chinese government.
- c. Pressure China to release Panchen Lama immediately and unconditionally along with his family members
- d. Urge the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances to continue pressing China for information
- e. Appeal for diplomatic pressure from governments worldwide through bilateral talks and multilateral forums
- f. Support the Central Tibetan Administration’s continued advocacy efforts
- g. Call China to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance
- h. Advocate for religious freedom protections, particularly regarding the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of recognizing religious leaders
- i. Call for transparency regarding China’s policies on religious appointments, especially concerning the selection of Tibetan Buddhist leaders

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- j. Support documentation efforts by human rights organizations to maintain attention on this case as one of the world's longest-running enforced disappearances.