

AI INDEX: ASA 35/06/96  
30 AUGUST 1996 - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

News Service 156/96

**PHILIPPINES: GOVERNMENT DENIES VISAS TO TWO TIBETANS ATTENDING HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE**

MANILA -- The human rights organizations Amnesty International and FORUM-ASIA condemned the decision by the Philippines government to deny visas to two Tibetans due to attend an international conference on human rights in China beginning here today.

Gedun Rinchen, a Tibetan who was detained by the Chinese authorities in Tibet, and Tempa Tsering, a representative of the Dalai Lama, were told by the Filipino Embassy in Delhi that their presence would be too sensitive. Both are based in Dharamsala, India, which is the base of the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader.

"This decision is yet another graphic illustration of the way other governments are willing to comply with China's insistence that its human rights record should not be held up to international scrutiny," the organizations said. "By denying access to Tibetans, the Filipino government is simply echoing China in blocking the fundamental right of freedom of speech."

Gedun Rinchen was due to give a paper describing his detention and subsequent human rights work, while Tempa Tsering was attending as an observer at the conference, which will focus on China's human rights record and ways to support human rights defenders throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The denial of visas follows crackdowns by other governments on criticism of China -- which resulted in arrests of Amnesty International members in Thailand and Nepal earlier this year.

"The Chinese government claims that its human rights record is an internal matter and any criticism is 'interference'," the statement said. "However, it has demonstrated on many occasions that it is willing to 'interfere' by pressuring other governments to block meetings and visits."

"In the past, the Filipino government has publicly committed itself to defend the principle of universality of human rights. Unfortunately, in practice the government is willing to suppress an international forum aimed at upholding that principle."

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