

TIBET INTERCONTINENTAL HOTEL OPENS ITS DOORS TO CHINESE PROPAGANDA AND CONTROVERSY



Communist party strongman's visit, involvement in "Happy Lhasa" propaganda event, "laughable" Tibetan language and low Tibetan employee targets undermine company's Tibet-friendly PR

The controversial InterContinental Resort Lhasa Paradise in Tibet - the subject of an ongoing campaign by Tibet supporters worldwide - will open its doors for the first time this weekend to host an event forming part of a prestigious Chinese government propaganda jamboree (1). The hotel will also host a "celebration" on 25 August, featuring a "ceremony full of ethnic characteristics" (2). InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) anticipates that less than half of its employees in Lhasa could be "local Tibetan" (3).

According to the Lhasa government website,, the new hotel will host the "Shoton trade fair" between 24-28 August. The fair is part of the week-long government "Beautiful Home, Happy Lhasa" programme surrounding the annual Tibetan Buddhist Shoton festival (4). The Chinese government claims to protect religious activities but suppression of religious freedom in Tibet has been heavily criticised by no fewer than three independent international reports this year alone (5). Last year, the religious festival itself was subject to a huge military and security presence (6, pictures available).

The hotel's participation in the propaganda events follows a recent visit to the hotel by senior city Chinese Communist Party official, Qizhala (7). Qizhala is heavily involved in China's repressive security apparatus in the city. (photographs of Qizhala with security forces available, 8)

Chinese language media reports Qizhala's support for "counter-terrorism riot control" and the "taut" maintenance of social stability (9) - Chinese government language for the repression of Tibetan protest. In 2013, he spoke about China's "Grid Management System", that uses Communist party officials at neighbourhood and street level to monitor signs of Tibetan opposition to Chinese rule. He stated that the grid system was aimed at "fighting against the 14th Dalai Lama and other overseas Tibetans, and hostile foreign forces" (10). Human Rights Watch has described the system as "Orwellian" and aimed at "surveillance and control . . . while the Tibetan people are still waiting for Chinese attention to rampant violations of their rights" (11).

In March - a traditional time of unrest in Tibet and the anniversary of the fatal shooting of more than 100 Tibetan protesters in Lhasa in 2008 - Qizhala was one of a select group of politicians reviewing troops at a military exercise on the streets of the capital (12, photos available).

IHG's attempt to demonstrate sensitivity to the Tibetan community has also backfired significantly. Online publicity about careers in IHG issued the Tibetan language (the first time IHG has used Tibetan online) has been described by a Tibetan speaker as "the worst translation I've ever seen". Within two paragraphs, the company uses three different spellings of its own name. The same material on IHG's website is written in perfect Chinese (13).

The hotel is not expected to open for paying guests until next month.

Free Tibet's director Eleanor Byrne-Rosengren said:

"IHG has kept the hotel opening very quiet and has nothing about the event on its English-language website. That's not as strange as it sounds, given that what the company is doing makes clear that its loyalty lies with China's government in Tibet, not the local people whose human rights are abused by it. Anyone with any knowledge of Tibet knows that the 'Happy Lhasa' festival is an exercise in propaganda, designed to mask the intense and brutal suppression of religious freedom. Anyone with any knowledge of the Tibetan language knows that IHG's attempts to communicate in it are laughable and tokenistic.

"IHG has blundered on with this hotel hoping that some superficial and badly-advised Tibetan set-dressing will disguise the fact the project exists to serve the Chinese government's agenda. A multinational hotel company has no excuse for its ignorance of the local conditions in which it operates and no excuse for cosyng up to the government responsible for the ongoing human rights crisis in Tibet. We're left to conclude that the 'Lhasa Paradise' is designed to curry favour with a Chinese government whose cooperation and indulgence is central to IHG's strategic vision of expansion in China."

IHG's Chinese partner in the hotel, Deng Hong of Exhibition & Travel Group, is currently jailed as part of a major corruption investigation in China. Mr Deng faces charges relating to the illegal purchase of land (14).

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