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USCR Condemns China and Nepal's Forcible Return of Tibetans, Calls China Among Top Violators of Refugee Rights

Washington, D.C., June 3, 2003 Today, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) condemned both China and Nepal for their roles in the forced return of 18 Tibetan refugees, including four children, to China.

On Saturday, Nepalese police loaded the refugees, who were reportedly crying out for help, onto a minibus sent by the Chinese authorities. Chinese officials then drove the refugees back to China, which controls Tibet, accompanied by Nepalese police officers. According to news reports, a Tibetan refugee living in Nepal threw herself in front of the bus in an effort to prevent it from leaving. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had earlier called on Nepal not to return the refugees.

According to USCR Communications Director Hiram Ruiz, who has made several visits to the region to assess the treatment of Tibetan refugees in Nepal and India, "It would be difficult to find another country that has violated the rights of refugees more callously in the past year than China."

The *World Refugee Survey 2003*, which USCR published last week, found that in 2000 China forcibly returned tens of thousands of North Korean refugees to North Korea, where they were jailed, and in some cases tortured and killed. "Now," Ruiz said, "Beijing has bullied its small, politically unstable neighbor Nepal (whose embattled prime minister had resigned the day before) into handing back Tibetan refugees who they will undoubtedly imprison for trying to seek freedom."

This is not the first time that Nepal has forcibly returned Tibetan refugees to China. In the late 1980s, Nepalese authorities on several occasions rounded up Tibetans who had managed to flee across the Himalayan mountains and returned them to China. In a 1990 report on the refoulements (forced returns), "Tibetan Refugees: Still at Risk," USCR called on Kathmandu to cease the deportations.

In response to international pressure, Nepal then agreed to hand over newly-arrived Tibetan refugees to UNHCR and Nepal based Tibetan exile groups, which would arrange to transport them to India. The United States provided funding for the program. As a result, for more than a decade some 2,000 Tibetan refugees per year have been able to reach safety in India, which is home to the Dalai Lama, Tibetans' spiritual leader.

"The international community and UNHCR should strongly rebuke Nepal for forcing back these 18 Tibetan refugees and should endeavor to ensure that Kathmandu does not repeat this action," said Ruiz. "However, China, which is party to the UN Refugee Convention, is the main culprit in this trampling of the rights of refugees and should bear the brunt of international condemnation." He added, "UNHCR should call on its Executive Committee to censure China for its flagrant violations of the UN Refugee Convention. The U.S. government and other governments party to the Refugee Convention should also demand that China respect the rights of refugees."

USCRI is a public information and advocacy program of Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA), a nongovernmental, non-profit organization. USCRI defends the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons worldwide.

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