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Lost symbol of Tibetan freedom uncovered in Nepal

AFP



A passport issued to a Tibetan official before Chinese forces occupied the remote region over half a century ago has been found in Nepal and provides proof of Tibet's former independence, a Tibetan exile group has said.

The passport was issued by the Tibetan government in 1947, Tenzin Tsundue, general secretary of the Friends of Tibet group, said in a statement.

He said the group knew of no other Tibetan passport that had survived.

The passport -- a large sheet of traditional Tibetan paper -- was given to then Tibetan Finance Secretary Tsepong Wangchuk Dedhen Shakabpa, who was leading a trade delegation to China, the US and the UK, it said.

"This document stands as an important proof of the independent status of Tibet, legally recognized by other countries before China's invasion of Tibet," Tsundue said.

He said the document had visas issued by a number of nations among which were the US, the UK, India, France, Italy, Switzerland and Egypt.

The passport contains in the center the Tibetan government seal surrounded by seals of different governments that issued visas to the official, he said.

China says its occupation of Tibet liberated it from feudal oppression.

But Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama who fled from Tibet in 1959 during a failed uprising against China's rule and now lives in exile in northern India maintains that Tibet's six million people continue to suffer repression.

Beijing formally established a Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1965 but the Dalai Lama complains there is no genuine autonomy and has been waging a peaceful campaign to press China to provide greater rights to Tibetans.

The passport had been given by Shakabpa to an Indian friend in 1992 and ended up with an antiques dealer in the Nepalese capital Kathmandu, Tsundue said.

It was not known how it found its way into the antique dealer's hands.

It was bought back for US\$10,000 using money that was borrowed from a Tibetan monastery in 2004.

Tsundue said some 850 Tibetans -- living in exile in India and Nepal -- contributed donations to repay the monastery. After the target was met, "we decided to inform the people of the recovery of the passport," he said.

The group plans to include the passport in an exhibition "Story of a Nation: Independent Occupied and

Articles that will be on display include "postage stamps of independent Tibet, Tibetan currency -- notes and silver coins -- [and] old photographs of the Tibetan army," taken in the 1920s, Tsundue said.