



Parlamentarische Gruppe Tibet
Groupe Parlementaire pour le Tibet
Parliamentary Group for Tibet

Binzstrasse 15
8045 Zürich
buero@gstf.org

Berne, 23rd May 2023

Marc N. Casper
Chairman, President and CEO
Thermo Fisher Scientific
168 Third Avenue
Waltham, MA 02451-1223

Open Letter: The Parliamentary Group for Tibet is concerned about the involvement of Thermo Fisher Inc. in the mass collection of DNA samples from the Tibetan people and demands clarification about the company's activities in Tibet.

Dear Mr. Casper

The Parliamentary Group for Tibet, which consists of 30 members of the National Council and Council of States of Switzerland, is very concerned about the information it has received that Thermo Fisher Scientific Inc. has allegedly sold equipment for collecting DNA samples to the authorities of the so-called "Tibet Autonomous Region" (TAR).

According to a September 2022 report¹ by the Citizen Lab organization, TAR authorities have been collecting DNA samples from the population en masse since 2016. Citizen Lab's report is based on publicly available documents from government agencies. By September 2022, nearly one million samples were reportedly collected, representing nearly one-third of the TAR's population. The collection is done from the entire population from the age of five, and the individuals concerned cannot oppose the sample collection. The authorities justify the DNA collection as a whole on the grounds of "crime prevention" and as a means to search for missing persons.

In your November 14, 2022, response to a letter from a coalition of human rights groups expressing grave concern about the deliveries to authorities, you stated on November 22, 2022, that the number of samples delivered was "consistent with the rate of these crimes in the region" and that you are "proud to be a part of the many positive ways in which our Human Identification products have been applied."

In your January 24, 2023, response to the Congressional Executive Commission on China (CECC), you also represented that the sample containers sold represents a small amount. This would be "entirely consistent with a law enforcement entity engaging in routine forensics investigations" in such a region. In your letter, you write that you have established ethical and responsible guidelines for the sale of your technology and that these are guided by widely accepted global scientific and ethical standards.

Your comments cast serious doubt on whether the ethical principles² you cite are being followed:

- You claim that the amount of sample containers sold is "consistent with the rate of crimes" in the TAR. As you know, the police in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in general, and the police in Tibet in particular, consider any undesirable political activity to be a "political crime." Therefore, you cannot rule out the possibility that DNA data in this way will help identify Tibetans who are "political criminals" in the eyes of the police. We would like to point out to you that in its annual report "Freedom in The World 2023"³, the organization Freedom House ranks Tibet as the least free country in the world for the third time after 2021 and 2022 - on par with Syria and South Sudan. We therefore fear that your products directly contribute to the terrible political repression in this region.

¹ <https://citizenlab.ca/2022/09/mass-dna-collection-in-the-tibet-autonomous-region/>

² <https://corporate.thermofisher.com/content/tfcorp/site/us/en/index/corporate-social-responsibility/operations/governance-and-ethics.html>

³ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>



Parlamentarische Gruppe Tibet
Groupe Parlementaire pour le Tibet
Parliamentary Group for Tibet

Binzstrasse 15
8045 Zürich
buero@gstf.org

- The DNA data is stored in databases of the PRC police in Tibet. Their use or disclosure can therefore not be controlled. The mass collection of data only "on the basis of suspicion and reservation" cannot be justified by "fighting crime". Such a practice seems to us to be in contradiction with the control of "ethical and responsible sales" that you claim to apply.

- It cannot be ruled out that DNA data will be used for purposes other than solving crimes. In fact, it is very likely that this is already the case. Scientific publications were published that contained DNA data of the Tibetan population. These articles had to be withdrawn⁴ after protests by ethicists, as there was no guarantee that the consent of the persons concerned had been obtained prior to using the genetic data. The globally applicable ethical standards for research on humans must comply with the "Declaration of Helsinki"⁵ of the World Medical Association. This requires, among other things, that the donation of samples be voluntary, that the persons concerned be fully informed about the use of the data collected from them, that they have the right to refuse the collection of samples, and that they be informed about the storage of the data. Incidentally, you explicitly refer to the "Declaration of Helsinki" in your own internal ethical guidelines.

We therefore ask you to help us dispel our doubts that your company may be supporting the PRC's repressive practices, on a large scale and to the detriment of the Tibetan people.
We would therefore greatly appreciate it if you would agree to

- describe in detail what measures you are taking to ensure the ethical use of the material provided and the data collected in Tibet;
- in this context, provide us with information on how you guarantee the ethical use of sample containers and analytical data to your purchasers in the TAR;
- provide us with specific information as to whether your current practices in selling materials from the PRC and the use controls employed are in compliance with the "Declaration of Helsinki".

If these questions are not answered satisfactorily, or if you are unable to provide sufficient assurances, we can only request that you terminate your cooperation with the PRC with respect to sample containers and other materials, as appropriate, for the collection, analysis, and storage of DNA data from the Tibetan population.

Pending your response, we remain yours faithfully,
on behalf of the Parliamentary Group for Tibet

MP Nik Gugger
Co-President

MP Fabian Molina
Co-President

MP Nicolas Walder
Co-President

MP Maya Graf
Vice-President

This open letter will also be copied to

to your Swiss branches, to the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs SECO and to the two economic departments of the cantons of Berne and Basel-Landschaft.

⁴ <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03775-y>, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03775-y>

⁵ <https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki-ethical-principles-for-medical-research-involving-human-subjects/>