

After nearly 10 months of campaigning, Tibetans and Tibet campaigners are buoyed by the news that Google has publicly confirmed, at its shareholders' meeting, that there are "no plans to offer a search engine in China."

This confirmation came after Sundar Pichai, Google's CEO, stated at the weekend that a 'censorship free internet' would be an important condition for them to operate in China.

Tibetans and Tibet campaigners have worked in partnership with Chinese and Uyghur rights activists, digital technology experts and ethical consumer

rights campaigners to build pressure on Google not to pursue

'Dragonfly', on the grounds that it would compromise the company's stated

commitment to human rights protection.

Google staff leak

The coalition of activists was alerted to the secret existence of

'Dragonfly' in 2018, after Google staff leaked information about the search

engine.

The leaks highlighted that 'Dragonfly' was designed to block

internet users in China from information about human rights or democracy

and to censor 'sensitive' phrases such as 'Free Tibet', 'Tiananmen Protest'

or 'Dalai Lama'.

Furthermore, for Google's search engine to comply with

China's strict cyber security laws the company would have to automatically

make a user's search history available to the Chinese government, thereby

jeopardising the safety of any user.

Shareholders' meeting

The latest statement confirming that 'Project Dragonfly' had been halted

came on 19 June, during the shareholders' meeting of Google's parent

company Alphabet in San Francisco.

During the shareholders' meeting, Tibetan campaigner Sonamtso, Campaigns

and Communications Director for Students for a Free Tibet, made a statement

to the Board and shareholders that articulated the strong concerns that

Tibetans and other groups have raised about Project Dragonfly.

In her statement, Sonamtso told the Google executives and shareholders present:

"I come from a country where people are imprisoned for using search terms

that the Chinese government doesn't like and considers "sensitive." These

human rights violations are real and Google must not be complicit.

Frontline communities don't have the luxury of waiting for all of your

"hypotheticals" to turn into real risks for us. You have violated the trust

that your customers place in you, and that is bad for shareholder

value. Google's willingness to collude with the government of China sets an extremely

dangerous precedent for internet freedom around the world."

Following the statement, Kent Walker, Google's senior vice president of

Global Affairs, responded to questions about 'Project Dragonfly' by

confirming that the company had no plans to work on the censored search

engine, but under questioning stopped short of completely ruling out future

collaboration with the government of China.

No response to communications

Despite sending four letters to Google CEO Sundar Pichai raising concerns

about 'Dragonfly', and the unprecedented crisis of repression unfolding

against Tibetans, Uyghurs and Chinese dissidents, the Coalition received no

response from the company.

This lack of engagement by Google meant that those campaigning were forced to wait until the shareholders' meeting

to speak directly to Google executives and shareholders, and to receive final confirmation that "Dragonfly" had - at least for now - been abandoned.

Outside the meeting venue, Tibetans handed out leaflets and engaged with

Google shareholders, telling them about the realities of life in Tibet and

the human rights abuses that are committed under Chinese occupation. The

consumer group SumOfUs also submitted a petition, signed by 86,000 people,

urging Google CEO Sundar Pichai to end Project 'Dragonfly'.

Global action

The activities in San Francisco were part of a global day of action against

Project Dragonfly. During the course of 19 June, Chinese, Tibetans, Uyghurs

and their supporters held vigils and protests outside Google offices around

the world, calling on the company to scrap Project Dragonfly. Actions took

place at Google offices in 15 cities across the globe, including London,

Mumbai, New York, Paris, Sydney and Toronto.

Teng Biao, Chinese Human Rights Lawyer and Activist said: "Just last week

two million Hongkongers marched for their fundamental rights; the week

before thousands of people around the world rallied to remember the

atrocities of the 1989 Tiananmen Massacre, but because of China's high-tech

totalitarianism the majority of people living in Mainland China know

nothing of these events. Google have done the right thing by stating it has

“no plans” to provide technology to promote dictatorship.”