

## Voices from Tibet

Since March 2008, Tibet has been the source of much news and angst. The following compilation of material from the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) and the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) provides some insight into the lives of a few ordinary residents and monks in Tibet.

This letter was sent to the ICT:

### **'Voice of a Tibetan on the March 14 unrest in Lhasa'**

22 March 2008

“With recent unrest in Lhasa, there has been massive coverage on international and domestic media, but none of these is trying to give a truthful and clear picture of the causes that contribute to these events. As a Tibetan who has been living and working in Lhasa, I believe it is important to consider the following factors that I believe led to the recent unrest in Lhasa:

#### 1) Han immigration to Tibet

- Most of the business opportunities are taken by Han Chinese - 70% of businesses are owned and operated by the Han.
- No true autonomous policy exists in Tibet. Whereas other autonomous counties, prefectures, and provinces in China have adopted policies that ensure benefits to local people, no such policies seem to exist in the TAR. Local officials within the TAR are afraid that they will be branded as Tibet sympathizers and lose their positions if they try to instigate any such policies.
- While the government promised that the new railway to Lhasa would bring prosperity, tourism, and cheaper goods to the region, the reality is that it has brought so many new settlers to Lhasa that the demand for, and consequently the price of, everyday commodities has sharply risen. Meanwhile, the benefits from the increase in tourism go mainly to Han immigrants because Han tourists prefer to travel with Han guides and companies. More than 70% of hotels, restaurants, shops, tourist vehicles, and travel agencies are owned and operated by Han immigrants. Levels of unemployment amongst Lhasa Tibetans remain high due to the increase in migration to Tibet.

#### 2) Religious freedom

- Despite Beijing's claims that religious freedoms are granted in Tibet, what exists is little more than a facade designed to fool tourists to the area. Students, government employees, and Tibetan Communist Party members are forbidden to visit monasteries and attend religious ceremonies and festivals - there are even cases of government employees being fired from their jobs for visiting monasteries.
- All materials related to the Dalai Lama are forbidden in Tibet. This is the rough equivalent of forbidding Catholics to have anything pertaining to the Pope. These rules are enforced by random inspections and searches of houses and stores, looking for objects such as pictures, books, recording and other materials that could be associated with the Dalai Lama.
- Monks are forced to write denouncements of the Dalai Lama and attend classes in patriotic and political education.
- The number of monks is very tightly controlled by a government branch called the 'religious affairs department.' To be admitted in a monastery one needs a recommendation letter from one's own township, county government and permission of religious affairs department. Even worse,

Beijing has recently put a new law on the books, which states that all high lamas must be approved by a government committee in Beijing. Think of this as the rough equivalent of the US government appointing the leaders of churches.

- Beijing even installed their own "Panchen Lama," after making the Tibetan chosen child and his family mysteriously disappear. The true Panchen Lama and his family have never been seen again. Tibetans of course have no faith in Beijing's chosen Panchen Lama, who has himself denied being an incarnate lama. The government then made it compulsory for each family to send at least one member to attend the welcome ceremony upon his visit to Lhasa. Those who did not send at least one member of the family to pledge their respect were fined.
- Monks are always discriminated and targeted as the primary danger to the state, and any religious activity carried out without prior government approval is handled exceedingly harshly. For example, in 2007 two statues were built without permission of the government near the sacred Mt. Kailas. The army was later sent to destroy them, and those who constructed them were punished.

## 2) Dilution of Tibetan culture and identity

- Due to policies encouraging massive immigration to Tibet, Tibetans have become a minority in their own land.
- Most of the subjects in schools are taught in Chinese only. Tibetan language is taught only up to middle school. Nowadays it is even impossible to post a letter with an address written in Tibetan.
- Young people and office workers are encouraged to use Chinese language instead of Tibetan, so the younger generation is starting to lose their own language and culture. Many young, urban Tibetans are ashamed to speak Tibetan, preferring to speak Chinese as a sign of their education. Even for those who wish to study Tibetan language and culture, there are virtually no resources available to do so.
- Any person who starts a Tibetan language center or school is constantly under suspicion and surveillance by the government. Such institutions are frequently shut down ostensibly due to their association with foreign organizations. According to the law of the People's Republic of China, all 56 minorities in China are entitled to preserve their own language and culture. But, in Tibet, any efforts at doing this result in suspicion and repression from the government.

## 3) Provocative propaganda in the media

- Official Chinese media is always childish with their false accusations of the Dalai Lama. They try to claim he is responsible for a situation which has been entirely created by the government. The government should look to the Dalai Lama for a peaceful solution to the problem. The only reason why there is even a semblance of control in Tibet is because the Dalai Lama has requested that people remain calm and not commit violence. If the Dalai Lama instigated these riots, I can confidently say that the situation would be much, much worse. The Chinese media may fool their own population, which has no source of news other than the government, but the rest of the world is not fooled, as information is available everywhere.
- Tibet has become a proving ground of sorts for Chinese officials looking for further promotion. Those who promote very harsh policies in Tibet are often posted to higher positions--current President Hu Jintao is a classic example. After a reign of terror in Tibet, the communist party promoted him straight to President.
- The government constantly promotes the image of the Communist Party as the saviors of the poor Tibetan people from serfdom and slavery, condemning the old society of Tibet. If this were truly the case, people would of course be loyal to the government. The fact that people are unhappy enough to rise up and riot should be a clear indication of how people truly feel about the policies imposed on the Tibetan people.

#### 4) Unrestricted exploitation of the natural resources of Tibet

- With fast economic growth and ever increasing demands for energy, Tibet's resources have been exploited without proper rules and regulations. The beneficiaries of this environmental exploitation are all wealthy business groups from eastern China, especially Hong Kong. Meanwhile, the nomads and farmers whose land and water are destroyed receive virtually no compensation. Even worse, they do not understand the health risks of drinking contaminated water from mining sites. There have been several incidents where nomads' animals died after drinking such water.
- Deforestation is occurring on a massive scale in Gonpo area, where it contributes to downstream flooding on the Brahmaputra River. Ironically, this area has been dubbed the 'Grand Canyon Nature Reserve,' even while huge swathes of forest are being cut down.
- Local culture, faith and lifestyles are not considered by the government when approving mining projects. Last year, the government approved a mining project on one of the nine sacred mountains, leading to a demonstration and ultimately a riot. In Chamdo, huge copper mines have dislocated nomads from their traditional pastoral lands with no compensation.
- The government is forcing over 100,000 nomads to give up their traditional way of life and move into rows of housing that the government has built. They claim they are protecting the sources of the 'Great Rivers', but this couldn't be less true. The Chinese should look for the sources of pollution further downstream, where they support the industry on which the Chinese economy is built. The nomads near the sources of these rivers have been there for thousands of years, and the rivers were always fine. Only with China's economic boom have they become so polluted as to no longer support aquatic life.

Above are some of the main causes that contribute to the dissatisfaction and unrest in the Tibetan community. Instead of simply blaming the unrest on the Dalai Lama, the government should look closely at the situation with an open mind and enter into negotiations with Dalai Lama. What we are seeking is a genuine degree of autonomy (not to be confused with an independent Tibet), where Tibetans have the right to govern themselves within the Chinese system and preserve their own cultural and religious identity, while having equal economic opportunities to those afforded to the Chinese. As long as Tibetans can live happy, prosperous lives, we don't care what flag we do it under.”

Regarding Tibetan violence against Chinese people and property, the ICT reported one well-informed source from Lhasa as commenting, “Sadly, there is plenty of proof of Tibetan-instigated violence in Lhasa. This is so very sad for Tibetan people but shows just how desperate we are. Some stupid people could not see any other alternative. There is no doubt that Tibetan murderers and attackers should be punished under the law, but the hundreds and likely thousands of innocent Tibetans who are now being arrested should not be treated in the same way.”

#### **Tibetan monks**

On 27 March 2008, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs organized a media tour for selected foreign journalists. At their visit to the Jokhang Temple in central Lhasa, a group of monks interrupted the tour and surrounded the journalists. Images of the young monks calling for Tibetan freedom and in support of the Dalai Lama, with one monk breaking down in tears, were broadcast internationally. According to the journalists, the monks were adamant that what has happened in Lhasa “has nothing to do with the Dalai Lama”, with one monk saying, “They want us to curse the Dalai Lama and that is not right.”

Although Chinese officials assured the press that the monks would not be punished, their outburst shattered the notion that the situation in Lhasa was under control after days of unrest.

In fact, the ICT reported on the same day that Lhasa's three major monasteries Ganden, Sera, and Drepung, remained under lockdown and journalists on the official tour were not allowed to visit. The Ramoche temple in central Lhasa was also closed to the press group and after the Jokhang protest, the area was also closed to outside observers.

“Reliable reports from the city indicate that the water has been cut off at Ganden, Sera and Drepung, and monks are running out of food. Sources said that local people are not allowed to take food in for the monks, and one Tibetan source said that monks who tried to leave Sera were forced to go back after they had guns pointed to their heads.”

Also on March 27, the Tibetan Center for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) reported that monk Lobsang Jinpa of Ngaba Kirti Monastery in Amdo Ngaba committed suicide. In his signed suicide note Lobsang stated, “The Chinese government has leveled false allegations against the monks of Kirti Monastery for leaking State Secrets to the outside world, leading and organizing the protests and for keeping the dead bodies of Tibetan protesters shot dead by the Chinese security forces. However, all the charges leveled by the Chinese government were not committed by anyone in Kirti Monastery, but carried out solely by me.” The last line of the suicide note reads, “I do not want to live under the Chinese oppression even for a minute, leave aside living for a day.”

Three days later on March 30, a 75-year-old monk named Legtsok of Ngaba Gomang Monastery committed suicide. Sources say that some days before committing suicide, Legtsok accompanied by two other monks on their way to perform prayer rituals at the home of a Tibetan family, encountered a large contingent of Chinese security forces heading towards their monastery to quell the peaceful protests. Legtsok was brutally beaten and detained for a few days, before being released and sent back to the monastery. Legtsok repeatedly told his two disciples that “he can't bear the oppression anymore”. Those words served as premonition to his imminent death.

More recently, monks from the Labrang Monastery in Gansu province staged a protest in front of another state-organized media tour for foreign and Chinese journalists on April 9. A group of 15 monks burst into the courtyard where around 20 Chinese and foreign journalists were assembled and spoke about having no human rights, and about the Dalai Lama returning to Tibet. One of the journalists who spoke to the monks told the ICT: “The monks were very emotional, and one of them was crying. They said that they were not asking for Tibetan independence, but for human rights, and that they had no human rights now. They spoke mostly in Tibetan although then switched to Chinese and also some words of English to communicate. When some of them saw the photographers they threw their robes over their heads so we couldn't see their faces, but kept talking.”

The ICT reported that all of the monks have been detained and there are fears for their welfare in custody; monks detained after an earlier protest on March 16 were severely beaten. “One of the monks who demonstrated on March 16 and who has now been released from custody was apparently tortured so severely that his psychological condition is severely affected.”