

THE CURRENT HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN TIBET

Since China invaded Tibet in 1949 the human rights of the Tibetan people have been consistently violated. Forty eight years later, the degree of brutality has escalated rather than abated, and the existence of the Tibetans as a people with a distinctive cultural and religious identity is increasingly under threat.

It is frequently asserted by China that the development of the Tibetan plateau has 'liberated' the Tibetan people from their previously 'backward' society. If 'development' is to be measured only by new infrastructure, the construction of roads, housing and transport networks and Chinese-initiated enterprise, indeed Tibet has been 'developed'. Yet the human implications of these drastic changes to the Tibetan social structure are striking when one considers the lack of real benefit to the Tibetans themselves. It is always within this framework that one must judge the human rights situation in Tibet today.

1. Political repression

Political repression intensified in Tibet under Chinese occupation in 1996 as Tibetans inside Tibet continued to speak out against Chinese exploitation of Tibet as a land and the Tibetan people as a race. The exercise of the fundamental freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association and demonstration resulted in 215 known cases of arrests of Tibetans in 1996.

Twenty five of the known arrests followed the distribution of human rights leaflets, the pasting of pro-independence leaflets or the shouting of independence slogans in Tibet. In July 1996 Ngawang Sangdrol, a 20 year old nun, was sentenced to an additional nine years imprisonment for shouting "Free Tibet" while in prison and in March 1996 twenty-five students were arrested for publishing a literary magazine containing Tibetan love poems, prayers, riddles and short stories. Four of the students reportedly remain in detention.

Twenty two arrests in 1996 followed demonstrations by Tibetans. All were peaceful and non-violent, most lasting just a few minutes and comprising a very small group of individuals. On 6 July 1996, eight nuns were arrested for staging a demonstration calling for independence and celebrating His Holiness the Dalai Lama's birthday.

A glaring example of the Chinese authorities' willingness to misuse the law and to pass harsh sentences on innocent Tibetans as a warning to others was the staggering 18 year sentence passed on Ngawang Choephel on 26 December 1996. The Tibetan ethnomusicologist who had travelled to Tibet to prepare a documentary film on traditional performing arts was held incommunicado for more than 15 months without trial before being charged, without evidence, with spying for the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. Despite repeated pleas from Ngawang Sangdrol's mother, a critically ill and elderly refugee in India, she has been denied access to her son in prison.

2. Religious Repression

The brutal repression of freedom of religion is outstanding in Tibet. In 1996 the national "Strike Hard" campaign (or "Crack Down Severely on Crime") was launched in Tibet, targeted at "splittists" - individuals who support Tibetan independence and the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai lama.

The main sub-campaign of Strike Hard within Tibet is the "Patriotic Re-education" Campaign which aims not just to strike at the heart of Tibet's spiritual culture but also to clamp down on the powerful dissident movements in many monastic institutions. This campaign follows on from the order imposed in January 1996 that all photographs of the Dalai Lama were to be removed from the Norbulingka and Potala Palaces, and later from all public institutions, monasteries, nunneries and private homes.

Under the "Re-education" Campaign, regulations allowing entrance into monasteries have been strictly intensified and Chinese "work teams" have been sent in to "re-educate" monks along Communist lines and to instruct them on the "evils" of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan nationalism. A five-point political pledge requires monks to oppose the idea of an independent Tibet, to denounce the Dalai Lama and to recognise the Chinese-appointed Panchen Lama.

When monks refuse to accept these principles, which are anathema to their spiritual beliefs, they risk expulsion, arrest and imprisonment. Within Tibet there are reports of more than 1100 arrests and at least two deaths in 1996 in connection with the Strike Hard campaign. Twenty four of the arrests were a direct result of monks questioning a work team's form of education and reports of expelled monks total around 1300.

3. Detention and Torture

Today over 1019 known Tibetan political prisoners are suffering in various Chinese prisons in Tibet. The prisoners are, in most cases, suffering from conditions of detention which fall far below international standards and many are serving sentences of unfathomable severity. Often their sentences are extended for their attempts to continue to exercise their political rights whilst in prison. There are at present 38 known cases of prisoners serving more than 10 years in prison as a result of voicing their political opinions.

One such case is that of Tanak Jigme Sangpo, a former primary school teacher who is now 70 years old and serving one of the longest sentences imposed on a prisoner of conscience in Tibet. Tanak Jigme Sangpo had already served some 13 years in prison for independence activities when he was sentenced in 1983 to 15 years imprisonment for "counter-revolutionary propaganda and incitement". His sentence was subsequently extended by five years and later a further eight years for shouting independence slogans in prison. By the time he is released in 2011, he shall have spent 28 unbroken years and a total of 41 years behind bars - all for the exercise of his freedom of opinion and expression.

Torture

Reports of gross ill-treatment of prisoners and appalling prison conditions are common to all the prisons run by the Chinese Administration in Tibet. The effects of torture are exacerbated by a lack of medical care, inadequate nutrition and the imposition of hard labour. In 1996 there were

eight reports of Tibetans dying as a result of torture and ill-treatment at the hands of Chinese officials and three of these were deaths in custody.

Torture is frequently used as a means of obtaining "confessions" from Tibetan political prisoners or merely as a daily humiliation. The methods are horrifying in their variety and severity: inflicting of shocks with electric cattle prods; beating with iron bars, rifle butts and nail-studded sticks; branding with red-hot shovels; pouring boiling water over prisoners; hanging prisoners upside down or by the thumbs from the ceiling; shackling; kicking with boots; setting ferocious dogs onto prisoners; exposure to extreme temperatures; deprivation of sleep, food and water; prolonged strenuous "exercise"; long periods of solitary confinement; sexual violence; taunts and threats of torture and death.

4. Education, language and culture

Tibetan children continue to be severely discriminated against with regard to education in Tibet and the teaching of Tibetan language, history and culture is increasingly in danger of being completely eliminated from the education system. Until recently Tibetan children have been taught in their own language from age six until 13, have begun to learn Chinese from age nine. Chinese authorities in "TAR" in April 1997 announced that Chinese would be introduced from the first year of schooling and suggested that in some primary classes Chinese will replace Tibetan as the language of instruction.

When they reach medium school Tibetan students must switch to Chinese medium, with the exception of 40 "special" secondary schools in Qinghai province (incorporating Amdo). Similarly in tertiary institutions Tibetans are taught and examined primarily in Chinese. In December 1996, authorities announced that the History of Tibet course, taught by the University of Lhasa's Tibetan Language Department, would henceforth be taught in Chinese rather than Tibetan leaving all except one of the 17 university courses taught mainly in Chinese.

In addition to being discriminated by the dominance of Chinese language in classes and examinations, Tibetan students who have escaped to exile also report the dominance of Communist ideology and Chinese history in schooling and the imposition of prohibitive fees for Tibetan students.

Tibetan staff belonging to any offices under the Chinese Government are prohibited from performing all sorts of religious rituals including formal rites following the death of any family members. This also extends to retired staff whereby they are strictly prohibited from going to temples and monasteries to observe auspicious Tibetans religious ceremonies, public festivals and Tibetan New Year.

5. Women and Children

Groups particularly vulnerable to the brutality of the Chinese regime are women and children. Tibetan women continue to be subjected to torture and sexual violence and their reproductive rights are being actively violated by the Chinese authorities.

Like their male counterparts, Tibetan women are arrested and imprisoned for demonstrating support for Tibetan independence or for displaying disagreement with Chinese rule and ideologies. In 1996, 21 women were arbitrarily arrested and, in testimony to the particular

courage and activism of nuns in Tibet, they made up 20 of the arrests, all for their participation in demonstrations. There are currently 265 known female political prisoners.

Ngawang Sangdrol, a nun from Garu Nunnery, is currently serving an 18 year sentence, the longest known sentence of any female political prisoner in Tibet. Originally arrested for pro-independence demonstrating, she and 13 other nuns had their sentences extended after recording pro-independence songs in prison. In March 1996 Ngawang Sangdrol was amongst a number of female prisoners who refused to tidy her cell, apparently as a protest against the Panchen Lama re-education campaign being conducted in the prison, and also refused to stand up on one occasion when a Chinese official entered the room. When she was sent to stand in the rain as punishment, Ngawang Sangdrol called out "Free Tibet". As a result, Ngawang Sangdrol's sentence was extended by another nine years in July 1996.

Children

At least 50 Tibetan child political prisoners currently languish in Chinese prisons in Tibet for exercising their freedom of expression. They are detained in adult prisons, denied legal representation and contact with family and subjected to severe ill-treatment.

In 1996 more than 280 student monks under the age of 16 were expelled from their monasteries as part of the Strike Hard campaign. Gelek Jinpa, aged 14, and Dorje, aged 17, both from Ganden Monastery were each shot in the leg by Chinese troops in May 1996 when they joined protests against the ban on photographs of the Dalai Lama in the monastery.

6. The Panchen Lama Reincarnation

On 14 May 1995 the Dalai Lama announced Gedhun Choekyi Nyima as the 11th reincarnation of the Panchen Lama. Some days later the six year old boy and his parents went missing, reported to have been taken by Chinese security forces to Beijing. While China claims that the boy's parents requested that he be taken into custody for his own protection and that he is in danger of being kidnapped by foreign 'splittists', his safety and whereabouts remain unknown and no international monitor has yet been allowed to visit the family.

Meanwhile, the Chinese authorities had taken age-old religious practices and traditions into their own hands. On 29 November 1995, lots were drawn from a golden urn to select the Chinese candidate for the Panchen Lama position. This resulted in the selection of six year-old Gyaltsen Norbu who was subsequently enthroned on 8 December 1995.

Despite China's claims that they had thereby strictly adhered to Buddhist traditional procedure, the system of drawing lots is merely a part of the reincarnation selection procedure, resorted to only when all candidates prove equally promising. Moreover, the Tibetan method involves encasing the names of candidates in dough balls which are then rotated in a container until one pops out.

The golden urn was first suggested for use in selecting reincarnations of great lamas by a Manchu emperor in 1792 who, in making a 29-point suggestion for administrative reforms in Tibet, added: "Tibetans may ... decide for themselves what is in their favour and what is not ... and make a choice of their own." Tibetans continued to adhere to their traditional practices and rarely used the golden urn thereafter.

Fifty eight year old Chadrel Rinpoche, head of the Chinese Search Committee for the Reincarnation, also disappeared soon after the Proclamation Day. He had angered Chinese authorities in 1995 when he rejected China's plan to choose their own Panchen Lama and, following the Dalai Lama's proclamation of the reincarnate on 14 May 1995, he was arrested on 17 or 18 May 1995 under suspicion of having communicated with the Dalai Lama in exile regarding the choice of the reincarnation.

For the last two years Chadrel Rinpoche has been held incommunicado by Chinese authorities and on 21 April 1997, charged with "plotting to split the country" and "leaking state secrets", he was sentenced to six years imprisonment by Chinese authorities. Champa Chung-la, a 50 year old monk, and Samdrup, a 30 year old business man, were also sentenced for their involvement in the Panchen Lama reincarnation.

7. Discrimination

Since mid-1994, it is estimated that more 500,000 new Chinese immigrants have been moved into Tibet to work on the 62 new industrial development projects initiated by Beijing. These development projects have serious implications for the human rights of the Tibetan people. The population transfer that accompanies such project results in further marginalisation of the 6 million Tibetans who are now outnumbered by 7.5 million Chinese settlers.

These settlers receive preferential treatment in housing, employment, education and social services. New schools constructed in the "TAR" are primarily located in large towns and cities and are geared toward Chinese settlers. There are few schools in the countryside where Tibetans principally reside. Traditional Tibetan style housing has been destroyed in favour of communist style blocks. The latest project - the massive Three Gorge Dam - promises to wreak further havoc on Tibet's fragile ecological system, already seriously endangered by China's extensive deforestation and mining, and to propel a potential 1 million more Chinese into Tibet.

All high ranking officials in the "TAR" are directly nominated by the higher Chinese authorities and are Communist cadres with proven loyalties to the PRC. Similarly, Democratic Management Committees established by Chinese "work teams" in Tibetan monasteries and nunneries comprise individuals directly chosen by the Chinese authorities.