

Punitive expeditions

Despite the information blackout that has been imposed over the Tibetan areas of the PRC since the unrest of Spring 2008, sufficient details can be gathered from diverse sources inside Tibet to present a clear picture of the ensuing repression. Chinese media project an image of suspected lawbreakers being singled out for a clinical and efficient judicial response. This contrasts to the depiction that has emerged from independent sources, which suggests that whole sections of the Tibetan population assumed to have been at least sympathetic to the unrest, in particular monks and nomads, have been targeted. The official version that any unrest was the work of a "small group of splittists" therefore appears to be a claim the authorities themselves do not believe; rather they appear to be fully aware that the disturbances are the result of a general rejection of existing policies and a direct challenge to how China rules Tibet. The harsh approach taken by security forces on the ground, including the looting of cultural and personal property, and intimidation and subjugation, through measures ranging from arbitrary fines to torture, appears to be, if not encouraged, then tolerated by the PRC leadership. The strategy is strongly reminiscent of the type of 'punitive expeditions' undertaken historically by colonial powers with the aim of punishing those who had disturbed the imposed order and deterring others from fomenting further unrest, thus underlining the impossibility of maintaining a non-consensual alien rule by anything but force.

According to several eyewitnesses from the area, as dusk fell on 14 April 2008, Labrang monastery was encircled by two rows of security forces. The security men - it is unclear whether they were police, militia or military - also spread throughout the labyrinth of alleyways linking temples, colleges, assembly halls and the living quarters of monks within the monastic complex. As they entered buildings, they tore up altars, smashed or burned pictures of the Dalai Lama in front of monks, and confiscated computers, mobile phones and money. The systematic raid, which lasted until daybreak, targeted each and every monk's cell. What the monks resented most, apart from the desecration of images of the Dalai Lama, was that when the security forces left, they had also taken away old thangkas (religious scroll paintings) and antique statuettes that the monks had managed to preserve even during the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution. Many of these objects have great emotional, cultural, economic and, in some cases, historical significance. Appalled by these acts, the head lama of Labrang monastery, Jamyang Zhepa, informed senior, national-level cadres about these incidents, but no action has been taken so far.



The Convoy of the security forces arrives at Tsandrok monastery, 18 April 2008

During recent raids on monasteries, the seizure of personal belongings, especially antique religious objects, has become a common occurrence. A document received from Tibet by TibetInfoNet that lists in detail the artefacts seized during a raid on Tsandrok monastery, in Gansu province, characterises the type of valuables taken away in the course of similar raids on other monasteries. The raid on Tsandrok was carried out on 18 April 2008 by ethnic Chinese soldiers (Han). The monks' quarters, monastic halls and temples were searched with the security forces claiming they were looking for weapons, including guns, that were allegedly hidden there. Among the goods taken away were statuettes, thangkas, other religious objects, as well as antique porcelain bowls and jewellery. As it is customary in Tibet for families to give their most precious and valuable goods to a monk within the family, and virtually every family has at least one relative who is a monk, the valuables will either have been given to the monk as offerings or simply placed in his custody, since monasteries are considered to be safe places.

Troops took an antique statue of the Buddha made of copper and gold and measuring about 15 centimetres from Tsa Geleg, monk at Tsandrok monastery. They also took a ritual bell in its old bamboo and leather case and about eight antique porcelain bowls. From another monk, Amdo Tsultrim, gold statues of Palden Lhamo, the protective deity of Tibet, and Tara, a major female deity, were seized. The security forces also took his mobile phone worth 2,500 Yuan (UK£183; US\$365; EUR€231). The list of stolen goods is long but for the monks and the local community, the most tragic event was the theft of the most sacred statue in the monastery. This is a statue of the monastic protector deity, Tha Og Chogyal, which was a gift from the Seventh Panchen Lama (1782-1853) to Shatha Palgyal. The cherished gold and copper statue is seen as the 'very spiritual soul of the local people', and the monastery itself was built in 1819 to honour it.

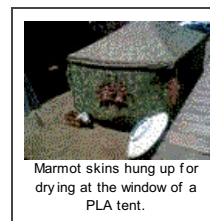
The seizure of personal possessions is not confined to monasteries; rural communities have had similar experiences. There are reportedly 20,000 security forces stationed in Machu county alone, in addition to the paramilitaries already present. In the last two months, raids have been carried out along with indiscriminate arrests. A local nomad reported that armed police and soldiers searched homes whilst making family members line up outside. They not only seized pictures of the Dalai Lama, they also took away family jewellery made of gold, turquoise and coral, as well as other valuable possessions such as old religious statues and money. Other than cattle and pasture land, nomads mostly invest their money in jewellery, religious or ritual objects and expensive costumes and, rather than depositing money in banks, they traditionally either keep it close at hand for easy access or exchange it for other valuables such as jewellery.

Confiscation of the ubiquitous motorbikes in nomadic areas, the pride of young men in particular, and the replacement for the traditional horses, has been repeatedly reported. Traffic police in Machu have seized hundreds of motorbikes from nomads who are required to pay 1,500 Yuan (UK£110; US\$218; EUR€139) for each bike's release. One source said that there were so many confiscated motorbikes that they filled the traffic police's compound and spilled into the streets outside.

Apart from the arbitrary seizure of private property, the security forces have been also systematically imposing heavy fines on people. The amount of the fines varies from area to area, and by alleged offences committed, but information gathered from Machu, Golok, Ngaba, and Luchu give some indications about the general scale. In these areas, anyone arrested has had to pay between 5,000 to 20,000 Yuan (UK£366 - £1466; US\$729 - \$2,914; EUR€463 - €1,851) to be released regardless of whether they took part in the protests or not. Those simply accused of taking part in "beating, smashing and looting" - and there has been no legal process to determine guilt or innocence - are fined between 15,000 to 40,000 Yuan (UK£2,932 - £1466; US\$2,186 - 5,828; EUR€1,388 - €3,702). The significance of these sums becomes clear when one considers that the average annual income of a nomad family is about 20,000 Yuan, and that farmers earn even less. Kobei, from Ngora township in Machu county who joined protests on 16 March 2008 was detained for a month and subjected to severe beatings. He had to pay 10,000 Yuan (UK£733; US\$1,457; EUR€925) for "taking part in riots" and another 350 Yuan for living expenses incurred during his detention in the county jail. Forty-one people from Ngora township were released on 16 April 2008, with each receiving a fine of 5,000 Yuan. Another fifteen nomads were released in early May and had to pay 15,000 Yuan each. A prominent local monk, who ran a private school for local nomads in Mera, Lodoe Sangpo, was released on 27 May 2008 after paying a total of 60,000 Yuan (UK£4,398; US\$8,742; EUR€5,550) in bribes and fines. His school was closed down due to his involvement in the protests. If one considers that, at a rough estimate, over 2,000 people were arrested in Machu county alone, the fines imposed by the local authorities are likely to have significant economic effects in Tibetan areas.

The conduct of the security personnel, including their looting of monasteries and private homes, raises questions about the extent to which this can simply be attributed to an erosion of discipline. In a similar way, the general lack of uniformity in standards, and inconsistencies in the amount of fines imposed, seems to suggest that security forces are either taking the law into their own hands or succumbing to corruption, as sources from the region concur that these fines are illicit. It is indeed unlikely that the higher authorities expressly instructed security forces to commit illegal actions. On the other hand, similar incidents of arbitrary fines and seizures of personal possessions that include non-political material, such as religious artefacts, are reported from different parts of Tibetan regions, including Ngaba, Machu, Rebkong, Labrang and Kardze. These recurring patterns in the security forces' actions strongly suggest that higher-level government officials must have provided them with some kind of tacit endorsement. This attitude is not new on the part of the authorities and is the basis of many extralegal procedures in place in Tibetan regions, including the widespread use of torture.

Next to these material pressures, the intensification of 'patriotic re-education' campaigns is a further feature of the current repression in monasteries, schools, work units and villages throughout Tibet. 'Patriotic re-education', in a nutshell, entails Tibetans being forced to publicly and aggressively denounce the Dalai Lama, and pledge allegiance to the People's Republic of China and the leadership of the Party. Many Tibetans complain bitterly about compulsory attendance at political meetings and the constant surveillance they are subjected to. A Tibetan from Labrang told TibetInfoNet that monks had to attend political meetings at least twice a day and were divided into nine separate groups that were not permitted to contact one another. Consequently, the monk had no knowledge of the whereabouts of arrested monks or what happened to those monks who had protested in front of foreign journalists on a government-controlled tour on 04 April 2008. A student from Lanzhou University said that Tibetan students had to attend daily political classes reminiscent of the 'struggle sessions' of the Cultural Revolution. They had to make confessions, reveal all their personal details and contacts, including their family and friends, and criticise the 'Dalai clique'. He told TibetInfoNet: *"It is mentally and physically exhausting and at times I would rather go to prison than attend these demoralising classes"*. Similarly, in Lhasa students were made to write essays, sometimes several times a day, criticising the 'Dalai Clique. Despair, suicides and renewed protests directly resulting from these campaigns have been reported.[\(1\)](#)



Marmot skins hung up for drying at the window of a PLA tent.

Torture, at least of noncompliant detainees, is widespread during the ongoing wave of repression in Tibetan areas. One source, who is in contact with several released detainees from Machu and Luchu counties, claimed that in addition to being violently kicked, punched, whipped and left to hang from the ceiling for hours on end, interrogators used electric batons on the sexual organs of both male and female prisoners. He said that many prisoners are left to seek medical care for themselves after their release. Four Labrang monks, Genja Sangnak, Genja Samten, Gedun, Jigme Goril, released in late April, were beaten so badly that they are unable to walk unaided. Genja Samten is said to be in a critical condition and all of them suffer from internal injuries.



Marmot skins hung up for drying at the window of a PLA tent.

According to information from Ngaba (Chin: Aba), at least two deaths from Jaro township can be confirmed as being a direct result of detainees being tortured during interrogation. Nechung, a 38 year-old Tibetan and mother of four, was arrested on 18 March 2008 for taking part in peaceful protests on 16 and 17 March in Jaro, where she had carried a picture of the Dalai Lama. She was held at Ngaba county jail and was badly beaten, along with other Tibetan detainees. Her mistreatment worsened when she refused to sign a document denouncing the Dalai Lama and pledging allegiance to the Chinese government. She also refused to stamp on a picture of the Dalai Lama. As a result, she received such heavy beatings that when, on 26 March, the police brought her home, she was semi-conscious and had to be propped upright and was unable to recognise any members of her family. When her family tried to take her to hospital, the police reportedly stopped them from seeking medical help. She died on 17 April 2008 without knowing where she was or receiving any medical care. She is survived by her four children, all minors, and her husband has been on the run since her arrest, apparently to avoid being arrested by the security forces.[\(2\)](#)

Another Tibetan, Patsekyab who received similar treatment was also present at the same protests in Jaro. Initially he had been in hiding but handed himself following the authorities' pledge of leniency for those who voluntarily gave themselves up. After being held in Jaro detention centre for about three weeks, he was transferred to Ngaba county jail on around 27 April. Out of the blue on 25 May, his family were informed that he had died of a "stomach complaint" and were ordered to collect his body from the local hospital. A source from Ngaba said that his entire upper body was bruised and swollen from the beatings he had received. He leaves behind his wife and six children. Considering that the current media blackout over Tibetan regions prevents systematic reporting, these accounts of the ongoing repression can be reasonably seen to be the tip of an iceberg of human rights abuses, the full extent of which is yet to come to light.



Local Party members and security forces in plain clothes waiting for foreign journalists, Machu, 11 April 2008

Tight security restrictions and control of communications are a now daily fact of life, and one that impacts all levels of society. Tibetan cadres in cities such as Siling (Chinese: Xining), Lanzhou and Lhasa have been instructed that they cannot get any leave until after the Olympics. Any Tibetans taking flights out of Lhasa are required to fill in a special form at the airport, whilst Chinese travellers fly in and out without restrictions. According to some Tibetans who recently visited Mainland China, Tibetans who travel to Chinese cities such as Chengdu and Beijing have been ordered to register with the local police and have only been permitted to stay in officially designated hotels.



Local Party members and security forces in plain clothes waiting for foreign journalists, Machu, 11 April 2008

The sheer number of military and security personnel currently present in Tibetan regions is already a source of constant tension and Tibetans resent their rough-handedness, blatant racism and a total disregard for the feelings and values of local people. Their attitude to wildlife is suggested by the picture from Amdo showing a military tent with marmot skins drying in the sun. There are also reports that troops shot nomads' guard dogs, with, for example, over ten Tibetan mastiffs killed in Ngora Shelkok.

The heavy military presence, de facto curfews in towns and the barring of foreign press from the entire region of the Tibetan plateau ensure a rigid grip over the Tibetan populace. At the same time, the authorities have put a huge effort into creating an impression of normality and give the appearance that the situation is under control without the need to deploy extra military and other security personnel. Multiple sources from different areas report that on 28 March 2008 in Lhasa, on the day a small group of selected journalists were on an official visit, armed soldiers hid in the compounds of government offices. Retired cadres and Party members were ordered to put on traditional Tibetan costumes and act as worshippers or pilgrims in the Jokhang, Lhasa's central temple, and around the Potala Palace. Public Security Bureau and State Security Bureau officers changed into civilian clothes and pretended to be either tourists or ordinary Lhasa citizens. In Labrang on 09 April, prior to the arrival of foreign journalists, soldiers either moved out of the monastery into the surrounding valleys or concealed themselves in government buildings and compounds. Local police and other security personnel were disguised as pilgrims or tourists. Further along the route of the press trip, in Machu on 11 April, local schools were closed and students were sent home to the surrounding grasslands. A large sign saying: *"Building work in progress"* was hung over the gate of the local junior school where a large number of soldiers were hidden. The rest of the soldiers changed into civilian clothes and went up into the mountains. As well as disguising the presence of security forces, and concealing troops who were never officially supposed to be present in the area, these measures appear to have had the aim of intimidating the local population and deterring them from staging protests in front of visiting journalists.



Local Party members and security forces in plain clothes waiting for foreign journalists, Machu, 11 April 2008

As these measures failed to stop local Tibetans in Lhasa and Labrang from protesting, in Machu further action was taken to isolate the visiting journalists from the crowd. Here, local police put on Tibetan costumes and disguised themselves as ordinary nomads with some of them forming a crowd around the visiting journalists. Monks were briefed the day before the visit on how to answer questions. TibetInfoNet obtained an audio recording of instructions given by a Chinese official through a Tibetan interpreter:

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The recording demonstrates how monks were made to parrot the Party line and ordered to say, amongst other things, that they "*support sovereignty of the Motherland and oppose Tibetan Independence*".

Notes:

- 1: See for instance: <http://savetibet.org/news/newsitem.php?id=1317>;
<http://www.tibetinfonet.net/content/news/10656>;
<http://www.tchrd.org/press/2008/pr20080424.html>.
- 2: This event was also reported by TCHRD: <http://www.tchrd.org/press/2008/pr20080505.html>.

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TibetInfoNet is an independent information service that provides news and analysis of the current political, economic, social, environmental and human rights situation in Tibet.

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