

Unrest in Labrang and eastern Tibet

The ongoing unrest in Lhasa has been the focus of the major international media outlets in recent days. The current crisis in Tibet appears to be an unprecedented movement that has swept through many locations across the Tibetan regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), unsurprisingly raising strong concerns in Beijing. Labrang (Chin: Xiahe), for instance, one of the main centres in the traditional Tibetan province of Amdo, today part of the PRC's Gansu Province, has emerged as one of the epicentres of the movement. On Saturday 15 March 2008, a protest rally took place in Labrang, carrying forward demonstrations which started the day before in apparent response to the protests in Lhasa. However, unlike in Lhasa on Friday, the Labrang protest was marked by political demands only, and did not result in ethnic clashes.



Sources in Labrang, who were themselves involved in the demonstrations, report that the opportunity for the protest arose from an annual mass religious congregation known as Nyipi Tsogchen, which occurs in the second lunar month and entails exorcist rituals. It is said there was a heavy presence of Chinese security forces comprising soldiers and armed police in and around Labrang town, prior to the demonstrations. The atmosphere was said to be tense as security forces in riot gear marched along the streets in an obvious attempt at intimidating the population.

Beginning the formal religious rituals an hour before the appointed time, monks and lay people then marched to the local Chinese government headquarters carrying unprecedented numbers of the banned Tibetan national flag and portraits of the Dalai Lama whilst shouting slogans.

A novice monk informed TibetInfoNet that people were shouting: *"Long live the Dalai Lama and may he return to Tibet! Human rights for Tibetans! Abolish the one-child family planning policy! Independence for Tibet and may those in exile be reunited with us soon!"* It is estimated that around three thousand monks and lay people gathered for the demonstrations, which were significantly large by local standards.

After the rally in front of the local government headquarters, demonstrators threw stones and other projectiles at a government-run restaurant as well as the office of the Chinese state telecommunications service, which the locals accuse of not employing Tibetans.

The protesters moved on to the headquarters of the armed police and then to the local Tibetan middle school. Protesters freed students who had been barred from leaving the school, and who then swelled the ranks. The demonstration culminated in a public incense burning ceremony. As the crowd became more vociferous and grew in size, the security forces used tear gas to disperse the protestors. A nomad pilgrim who witnessed the crackdown said there were loud bangs and then smoke filled the air as people either fell to the ground, which the source identified as a loss of consciousness, or became disorientated. A monk protester confirmed this statement and added that movement is now highly restricted in and around Labrang town. He concluded by saying that: *"the damage done to buildings was unfortunate but overall the demonstrations have been peaceful"*.



Monks also gathered in large numbers in Lutsang monastery (Qinghai Province) and Myera monastery (Gansu Province), calling for the return of the Dalai Lama. News about recent or current protests from the region continue coming in at a faster pace than confirmation is possible.

Sources from Amdo Ngaba (Sichuan Province) claim that seven protesters were shot dead and dozens injured by Chinese security forces. According to another Tibetan source, protests calling for Tibetan independence, in which the demonstrators displayed the Tibetan national flag and the Dalai Lama's portrait, have taken place in at least two different localities in Amdo Machu (Gansu). It is also reported that two different groups of nomads in Lithang (Sichuan) carried out anti-Chinese protests on 15 March.



The protests in the eastern and northeastern parts of the plateau, in tandem with the turmoil in Lhasa, demonstrate that the administrative division of Tibet between different provinces of contemporary China (the Tibet Autonomous Region as well as Gansu, Yunnan, Qinghai and Sichuan provinces) did not erase the pan-Tibetan sense of identity and affiliation. Spurred on by long-running grievances against the Chinese authorities, and conscious of a common culture and historical experience, Tibetans have learned to use modern communications technology to break through provincial as well as international boundaries. China's resurgent economy and its resultant partaking in a globalising world make it increasingly difficult to handle the Tibet issue as an 'internal affair'.

The current wave of protests started with peaceful rallies on 10 March (the 49th anniversary of the Lhasa uprising which led to the flight of the Dalai Lama into exile). On that date, incidents were reported from Labrang Tashikyil monastery in Sangchu County, where Buddhist monks led some 200 people in a demonstration. An Agence France-Presse (AFP) photographer said 15 monks ran down one of the main streets and were quickly joined by an estimated 200 people. Police reportedly confronted the protesters, halted the demonstration and confiscated political pamphlets.

The 10 March uprising is typically marked by tensions each year and occasional minor clashes. It is understood by Tibetans in Tibet as well as the Chinese authorities that the date is commemorated by Tibetans in exile as National Uprising Day. China's hosting of the Olympic Games in August 2008 further reinforces the international dimension of the demonstrations and is clearly seen by Tibetan protesters as an opportunity to show their plight to the world.

A young Tibetan intellectual from Labrang commented on the current demonstrations: *"Olympic athletes strain their every sinew and nerve for their respective nation and for the chance to sing their anthem and raise their flag. Likewise we [Tibetans] should do everything in our power to show our suffering at the hand of Chinese imperialism to the world through the Olympics"*.



The scale and intensity of China's response to protests across Tibet cannot yet be assessed. The authorities seem anxious to not upset the international audience with pictures of blunt repression. Past experience, however, showed that reprisal on dissenters often takes less visible, yet no less ruthless forms, including secret arrests, expulsion of monks from their monasteries, and extra-judicial punishment with rampant human rights violations. But it also showed that such repression finally reaches an international audience, albeit attracting less attention than dramatic images of street fighting and rioting.

The eastern parts of the Tibetan areas generally escape the visual attention which Central Tibet routinely enjoys. However, Tibetans' eagerness and their advancing skills in the use of increasingly available communications technology is beginning to address this imbalance.



TibetInfoNet has received information from Labrang that mass arrests and beatings are taking place, and Tibetans' movements are restricted, as Chinese security forces swarm the streets. A student who partook in both Labrang demonstrations stated that he knew of three laymen and one monk who had been arrested following the crackdown. A monk named Tenzin from Gyulmal college was severely beaten, leaving him unable to walk.

Note: Two short film clips showing crowds gathered for the demonstrations in Labrang are available on the exile-Tibetan website phayul.com, under the address: http://media.phayul.com/?av_id=89.

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