

Tibet Uprising Rally/ Tibet Martyrs Day – Rally 8 March 2015

Tibet Action Group of WA (TAGWA) held their annual rally in solidarity with Tibetan in Tibet, and Tibetan expatriates around the world. The rally commemorated 10th March 1959: a fateful date, known variously as Tibet Uprising day or Tibet Martyrs Day, when 87,000 Tibetans were killed in protests against the Chinese occupation of their homeland.

TAGWA Chair, June Lowe, commented on the difficulty of maintaining media traction on this issue, given the passage of 56 years and the ongoing suppression of information and increasingly influential role of the Chinese government.

“However, the length of this history should be cause for increased public concern, as the human rights situation in Tibet continues to deteriorate annually” she said.

On 7 February 2015, the Tibet Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) released its 2014 Annual Report of the human rights situation in Tibet, noting that despite promised reforms, the situation in Tibet continues to deteriorate.

The TCHRD Annual Report highlights deaths in detention, collective punishments, and restrictions on the right to freedom of assembly and association.

Political prisoners

TCHRD has built a Political Prisoner Database, which now includes information on 2,110 known political prisoners. Prisoners are tortured, beaten and denied medical care, and an increasing number of Tibetans have died because of their treatment in detention.

Collective punishments are illegal under International Law. However, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) warns that entire families and villages will be punished following a self-immolation protest. Protests are met with violent reprisals.

Second class citizens and suppression of culture

TCHRD records show that healthcare and education in Tibet are at the lowest levels experienced anywhere in the Peoples Republic of China (PRC). Tibetan people are treated as second class citizens in their own land. Many schools do not teach the Tibetan language with Mandarin being the compulsory language in education. Tibetan language classes organised by parents are often banned.

Monasteries are the last place where Tibetan culture is taught. However, there are official policies to restrict the size of monasteries and limit the access of younger people.

On 23 Feb 2015, Chinese authorities in the Northwest provinces in Amdo, announced that the young monks returning home for Tibetan New Year (Losar) would not be allowed to return to their monasteries and must enrol on local schools as lay students.

Tibetans continue to resist, despite severe consequences

In Tibet, demonstrations of allegiance to HH Dalai Lama are a dangerous affair, and even owning a portrait of the Dalai Lama can result in punishments. Chinese rulers in the region have forced Tibetans to disown their support of the Dalai Lama since 1994.

Despite these on-going crack-downs, public celebrations were held in a monastery in Amdo Ngaba to mark HH Dalai Lama's 80th birth year on 1st day of Losar (20 Feb 2015).

Following the Tibetan practice of 'Kyarton' – special celebrations to mark a person's 80th year – over 3,000 people demonstrated a bold show of reverence in the Sergon Thubten Chokle Namgyal Ling monastery, offering prayer scarfs to a life-size portrait of the 14th Dalai Lama.

This public celebration was held amidst a heavy security build up in the region –videos from 11 February 2015 show convoys of Army and Security Police arriving in the Ngaba township – leading some to fear the monastery will suffer reprisals once the New Year celebrations are over.

However, communities in Ngaba are no strangers to military presence; they have been under virtual Marshal Law since 2008, with security checkpoints restricting travel and security and re-education teams deployed in monasteries.

The on-going cultural suppression of Tibetan culture and brutal methods used to suppress protest result in a culture of fear among the Tibetan populace and widespread, gross violations of human rights in Tibet.

Australia-China relations

TAGWA calls on the Australian government to establish a strong human rights dialogue with the Chinese Government. To date, official Australian commentary on Tibet has been muted, with apparent concerns about damaging emerging trade relations with the PRC.

"This fear is misplaced. Indeed, a healthy trade relationship is based on the rule of law and assertive diplomacy. Assertive diplomacy has many advantages. First, it would support the many political progressives in China, supporting democratic reforms in the country. Also, by not speaking out, we are regarded by the Chinese government as weak and vulnerable: placing ourselves at a disadvantage as a trading partner. To develop a meaningful relationship with China, means confidently standing our ground on human rights in Tibet." Ms Lowe said.

Environmental concerns in Tibet

The second speaker at the rally was the Hon Giz Watson, formerly a Greens parliamentarian for 16 years, long-time campaigner for environmental and social justice, and a long-time supporter of the Tibet cause.

Hon Ms Watson drew attention to serious environmental concerns in Tibet that compounded local social justice concerns as well as having grave global consequences. The Tibetan Plateau is the largest high altitude landmass on earth, and the largest fresh water reserve outside the polar ice caps.

Sometimes called 'the Third Pole', these glaciers feed Asia's great rivers: the Yellow, Yangtze, Mekong, Salween, Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra. Data from the International Commission on Snow and Ice reveals that the warming planet is causing the Himalayan glaciers to shrink faster than glaciers anywhere else, and could totally disappear by 2035 – only 20 short years away.

The implications for water, food and energy security for the Asian subcontinent are dire. Potentially catastrophic floods and droughts will affect over 1 billion people in China, India, Nepal and Bangladesh and trigger massive refugee crises.

Chinese government policy to forcibly remove Tibetan nomads from their traditional pasture lands is causing loss of livelihoods, increased poverty, and social breakdown as well as exacerbating environmental degradation. The impacts on the nomads themselves are obvious and deplorable, but the environmental impacts are less well understood. Having grazed these high-altitude pastures for generations, these traditional practices have become integral to the ecosystem, and the removal of the nomads' herds threatens the world's last systems of sustainable pastoralism and the survival of the rangelands.

Tibetan and Western scholars point out that settling nomads runs counter to the latest scientific evidence that shows the importance of livestock mobility in ensuring the health of the rangelands and mitigating the impacts of global warming.

It is imperative that the Tibetan Plateau is managed collaboratively with the state and the local population, which would also ease local tensions.

Ms Watson concluded, "With correct management, the Tibetan Plateau could become a conservation buffer zone against an environmental tragedy that threatens one-fifth of humanity.

"We call on the Chinese Government to treat this with the utmost seriousness and urgency. We urge the Australian government to use whatever influence it has to encourage and support moves to protect the social and environmental values of the Tibetan Plateau".

(See also, Katherine Morton, *'China and Environmental Security in the Age of Consequences'* Asia Pacific Review, 15:2, 2008: 52-67; and International Tibet Council, *'Tibetan Nomads hold vigil in Chengdu to protect the grasslands'*, 30.1.2015).