



SITUATION IN TIBET – AN UPDATE

March, 2017: There have been several developments in recent months that indicate a continued tightening of Chinese control over Tibet and closing of space for Tibetans internationally.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

There are a number of sweeping regulatory measures that intrude upon Tibetan Buddhist monastic affairs (including the recent demolition of large parts of the Tibetan Buddhist institute of Larung Gar in eastern Tibet and the expulsion from it of thousands of monks and nuns), and links religious activity directly to politically charged crimes.

In December 2016 and January 2017, China further tightened controls on Tibetans, in some areas going from house to house to confiscate people's passports to prevent them from attending a major religious teaching given by the Dalai Lama in India. The Chinese authorities ordered Tibetans pilgrims already in India to return. Others were prevented from leaving China at all, even though many had spent years obtaining passports for legal travel. Upon their return to Tibet, they have been interrogated by police, many had their passports confiscated, with some even having their passports destroyed.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND ACCESS TO TIBET

In January this year, China announced an expansion of Tibet border regulations, reportedly aimed at combating the risk of 'terrorism' and 'separatism' in the region. However, in the absence of any violent insurgency or act of terrorism in Tibet, it is likely that this move was in fact more aimed at preventing Tibetans from traveling abroad, particularly to receive Buddhist teachings from the Dalai Lama and to for pilgrimages in India and Nepal. This is yet another example of the systematic restrictive measures imposed upon freedom of movement in Tibet; it is indeed extremely difficult for Tibetans to obtain passports.

SELF-IMMOLATIONS

The continued repressive policies in Tibet are reflected by the self-immolations of at least 146 Tibetans since 2009. The most recent one took place on March 18, 2017 when a young farmer named Pema Gyaltzen carried out a self-immolation protest in Nyarong, part of the Tibetan region of Kham. He was taken away by Chinese security forces and his condition is unclear. He is believed to be in a hospital in the provincial capital of Chengdu. Several family members and friends who went to claim his body were severely beaten by the police.

Almost all of the self-immolators called for freedom in Tibet and the return of the Dalai Lama back to Tibet. The Dalai Lama and the elected Tibetan leadership in exile have discouraged acts of self-immolation, but also asked the international community to understand the context in which they are occurring.

Instead of addressing the underlying causes, the Chinese authorities have responded by punishing those allegedly 'associated' with self-immolators, including friends, families and even entire communities, resulting in a spike in political imprisonments and numerous cases of Tibetans being 'disappeared'. This is believed to have been a factor in the decreased number of self-immolations compared to previous years.

TREND OF SOLO PROTESTS IN TIBET

In the wake of tightening Chinese control, one-person demonstrations have become a new trend in some areas of Tibet. There have been such solo protests in Ngaba area where the wave of self-immolations began in 2009 as well as in Kardze. It is notable that in this different pattern of protests, the young men and women who demonstrated have not harmed themselves. Most of such protesters have called for freedom for Tibet and for the return of the Dalai Lama to Tibet, with many holding up his images or clasping their hands together in prayer.

ENVIRONMENT DEGRADATION

The degradation of the environment in Tibet is also a source of deep concerns and protest for Tibetans, who consider nature as sacred. The Tibetan plateau is warming up twice as fast as the rest of the world, and the 'third pole' is now melting, with unforeseeable consequences for the global climate. The intensive mining, as well as the Chinese policies of resettlement of the nomads and water diversion projects are causing the desertification of the grassland and the pollution of the rivers, with devastating implications for Tibet, but also for the 2 billion people in Asia who are dependent on Tibet's rivers.

