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Protests, tensions escalate in Ngaba following self-immolation of monk: Kirti monastery under lockdown

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There is a deepening climate of fear in the Tibetan area of Ngaba, Sichuan, as a result of a worsening crackdown by the authorities following the self-immolation and death of a young monk called Phuntsog from Kirti monastery on March 16. The authorities have now imposed a lockdown on the monastery, with a new barbed wire fence and wall being built around the back of the monastic complex, and armed troops within the compound preventing monks from leaving and food from being delivered. All movement of monks is restricted and monks are even being prevented from burning incense for religious rituals. There have been several more disappearances of Tibetans from the monastery and lay community in the area, including the younger brother and uncle of the monk who set fire to himself, and a rigorous ‘patriotic education’ campaign is being enforced, creating further resentment and despair.

In a further recent development, Ngaba people – who defied the authorities in celebrating Tibetan New Year (Losar) in February – were warned prior to the Tibetan exile elections on March 20 that they would not be allowed to make incense offerings or light fire-crackers. Even so, and despite a heavy buildup of troops in the area, some people in Ngaba still made shrine offerings and set off fire-crackers on that day to mark the exile elections, according to Tibetan sources in exile in contact with Ngaba people. According to reports from the area, some Tibetans were detained as a result, although ICT could not confirm any further details. There were also detentions, including of a 16-year old boy, as a result of two further protests in the area following Phuntsog’s self-immolation, which took place on the third anniversary of a March, 2008 protest and crackdown at the monastery in Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province (the Tibetan area of Amdo). (ICT report, <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/chinese-authorities-confirm-death-monk-after-self-immolation-military-crackdown-kirti> [1]).

There are serious fears for all the monks at Kirti after a lockdown has been imposed at the monastery, a huge complex with concentric boundary walls that is now surrounded by armed troops. According to Tibetan exile sources, Kirti – one of the most important religious institutions in the area with a population of more than 2,000 monks – can now be described as being under “military blockade”. The authorities are now not even allowing food into the monastery, according to Kirti monks in exile.

According to the same sources, armed soldiers who had been guarding the monastery entered the compound and established observation posts on the platforms of the monastery’s stupas. They also began to build a barbed wire fence at the back of the monastery, where the boundary wall does not reach. Now Chinese construction workers have been moved in to build a concrete wall in addition to the fence, and all doors to the

monastery have been locked by the authorities, with no one allowed to leave or enter. Even elderly monks have not been allowed to do their ritual circumambulation of the outer path of the monastery. "The purpose seems to be complete restriction of movement," said a Tibetan source from Amdo in exile who is in contact with exiled monks. "As a result the monks are finding it very difficult to get enough food, and have been reduced so far to depending upon the tsampa (a Tibetan staple of roasted barley), butter and so on donated by laypeople, which is distributed by the monastery administration."

From March 19, according to the same sources, the monastery's regular programme of religious observances was cancelled, and monks are not even allowed to burn incense for their religious offerings. "Armed soldiers and police with dogs prowl around the monastery by night, beating up any monks they come across," said two Kirti monks now in exile in Dharamsala, India. "The monks have to study scripture in the second half of the day, and are not allowed to sit outside. For the last few days, the village committees in Ngaba county have been calling public meetings to praise and celebrate the Communist Party."

In a sign of the broadening crackdown, on March 22, Phuntsog's 19-year old younger brother Lobsang Kelsang, also a Kirti monk, his uncle Losang Tsonдру, and another Kirti monk called Samdrup from his home area, were detained apparently "under suspicion of involvement in Phuntsog's protest". The whereabouts of these three Tibetans is not known. Kirti monks in exile said: "These days the security forces are making arrests by night, and everybody is terrified of being arrested."

The same sources said that from March 20 onwards, a stringent patriotic education campaign was launched at Kirti. March 20 was also the date of the Tibetan exile elections across the diaspora, in which exiled Tibetans voted for a new Kalon Tripa (head of government) and new Parliamentarians. Some Tibetans in Ngaba marked the day by saying prayers and setting off fire-crackers, according to exiled monks from Kirti, despite the buildup of troops and imposition of political campaigns.

Peaceful protests following self-immolation result in more detentions

According to information from the same Tibetan exile sources, two peaceful protests followed Phuntsog's self-immolation, beginning on March 17, when pupils at the upper middle school in Barkham (Chinese: Ma'erkang) county in Ngaba staged a hunger strike in sympathy with local people suffering in the crackdown. The current situation at the school is uncertain, because of the local authorities' attempts to block all information. Students' mobile phones were confiscated, and there was a ban imposed on movement into and out of the school.

On March 23, according to the same sources, more than 100 people in Namda township in Dzamtang (Chinese: Rangtang) county in Ngaba prefecture staged a protest calling for freedom, and also for the Dalai Lama to return to Tibet. The protest was broken up by police who subjected Tibetans to severe beatings and arrested eight people. Four of them have been named as 40-year old Palko, a teacher at the township school; 35-year old Dorje, a local man; Ador, a 35-year old local man and Osel Dorje, a 28-year old man. The names of the others are not known, and the whereabouts of all eight is not known. There was no recorded protest in this area in 2008.

The authorities have begun to implement an intensified patriotic education campaign at Kirti. According to the same Tibetan source from Amdo, "Local officials have said that the government is very 'disappointed' in the attitude of people in Ngaba, especially in Kirti monastery. They have indicated that they will continue with the patriotic education and tight security for as long as it takes for the people to change their attitude."

Officials who arrived at Kirti monastery on March 21 to begin the patriotic education campaign repeated the false allegation made in the Chinese state media that monks had forcibly taken Phuntsog out of hospital and so were guilty of murder, according to exile sources. After Phuntsog set himself on fire on March 16, police put out the flames and were then observed beating him. At that point, Kirti monks intervened and sheltered him at the monastery before ensuring he received medical treatment at hospital, despite fears that he would be detained. Chinese official media reports in the days following the self-immolation confirmed the death of Phuntsog, but sought to distort Western media coverage of the incident and its aftermath through misleading and inaccurate reports.

According to the same Tibetan sources in exile in contact with the area, 20-year old Phuntsog's body was handed over to his family after he died in the early hours of March 17 following his protest in the main area of Ngaba county town near Kirti, which is on the western edge of town. Monks gathered at Kirti monastery at 8 am local time on March 18, according to the same sources, to make offerings and pray for Phuntsog, in accordance with tradition. The same sources said that "thousands" attended, saying: "Monks laid khatags (traditional white blessing scarves) on Phuntsog's body, and so many were weeping. They took his body to a place around three kilometers from the monastery, followed by laypeople as well, to cremate Phuntsog. It was a vast crowd, with so many people following the Kirti monks." A Tibetan from Amdo who is now in exile and who spoke to some sources said: "They really wanted to show their respect for this young monk's sacrifice for his country and freedom."

On March 22 a 16-year old Tibetan called Losang Jamyang from upper Tawa in Ngaba county was detained at his home late at night on March 22. Armed police broke down the door of his family house, and two friends who were with him, Wangchuk and Sonam, were also detained. Other residents of the pastoral communities of Tawa were also detained, although no further details are yet known of their identities.

Two days later, on March 24, 24-year old Kirti monk Losang Choepel, from the pastoral area of Kanyag Dewa in Ngaba county, was detained and taken away from the monastery. On March 25, 27-year old Losang Tsepak, a former Kirti monk who had been studying at university in Beijing, was detained, and his whereabouts are unknown. At around the same time, 32-year old Kirti monk Losang Ngodrup, from Cha township in Ngaba county, was detained. Neither their current whereabouts nor the reasons for their detention are known.

There are fears that tension in Ngaba will escalate still further if the current crackdown is not eased. Repression in Ngaba has been particularly severe since March, 2008, when demonstrations broke out across the Tibetan plateau including in Ngaba, where at least ten people were killed. Ngaba people are known for their strong sense of Tibetan identity and resistance to Chinese rule.

Kirti monastery, founded in 1472 by a disciple of Tsongkhapa, is one of the most important in the area. At its entrance is one of the largest stupas in Amdo, which is a major destination for pilgrims from all over Tibet. Following the March, 2008, protests, armed police raided the monastery and defaced religious images, including of the head lama, Kirti Rinpoche, who lives in exile in India.

This is the second self-immolation by a Kirti monk following the crackdown that was imposed after the demonstrations in March, 2008. Tapey, a monk in his mid-twenties, set himself on fire on February 27, 2009 as a form of protest after local authorities told monks at Kirti monastery that they were not allowed to observe Monlam, a traditional prayer festival that is held after Tibetan New Year (Losar).

According to several sources from the area, police opened fire on Tapey as he was surrounded by flames. The official Chinese press reported the incident, but denied reports that police had opened fire on Tapey. Tapey survived, but was taken into custody and his whereabouts remain unknown.

International Campaign for Tibet
1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC | 20036 | United States of America
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | info@savetibet.org
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