



Published on *International Campaign for Tibet* (<http://www.savetibet.org>)

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## **Reconstruction of earthquake-hit area excludes Tibetan participation, ignores local concerns: one year on from earthquake**

International Campaign for Tibet  
15 April, 2011

**After the one year anniversary of an earthquake that devastated Kyegu (Yushu), Tibetans continue to face uncertainty as opaque government reconstruction plans move forward without local consultation, raising concerns over the distribution of land and the future of what is a centuries-old Tibetan center of Tibetan culture and religion where Tibetans comprised 97% of the population. For three days from April 1, hundreds of Tibetans gathered to make a bold protest against the Chinese authorities' plans for land distribution and relocation, which have mainly excluded Tibetans from decision-making. Protestors who were detained after the protests were dispersed by armed police included many Tibetans who had been injured in the quake, some of whom had lost limbs.<sup>1</sup>**

*On the right: a photo of the Dalai Lama placed on top of ruins in Yushu.*

On April 14, 2010, a 6.9-magnitude earthquake<sup>2</sup> struck the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai province (Tibetan area of Amdo), leaving 2,698 dead,<sup>3</sup> 100,000 homeless,<sup>4</sup> and the city of Kyegu (also referred to as Jyekundo or Kyegudo) and the surrounding area in ruins. Sources with contacts in the area have told ICT that multiple reconstruction plans have been presented to the public, in addition to the official announcement that Kyegu would be rebuilt as “an eco-friendly tourist city,”<sup>5</sup> along with a new temporary name of Sanjiangyuan [The Three River Sources].<sup>6</sup>



Chinese authorities seized several thousand copies of a DVD movie about Tibetans' responses to the earthquake were seized by police in late March, according to reports from several sources including Radio Free Asia (RFA).<sup>7</sup> Several hundred local Tibetans reportedly signed a petition calling on authorities not to detain the monks and other people associated with the film, and local community leaders urged the authorities to “properly” handle their response to the movie or risk causing unrest. The incident was a further sign that the Chinese authorities are sidelining Tibetan interests and concerns in Yushu as well as continuing the documented trend of targeting artists and other intellectuals whose work is perceived as overly nationalistic.

Despite the Chinese government's commitment of over US \$3 billion within three years for reconstruction,<sup>8</sup> the rebuilding process has been fraught with problems from the beginning.<sup>9</sup> One western NGO worker who spoke with ICT and has contacts in the Kyegu area, told ICT that locals have continuously protested the reconstruction process since it began. According to Tibetans now living in exile with contacts in the Yushu area, approximately 200 held a bold protest on April 5. Tibetans protested for the release of nearly 40 Tibetans, most of whom were either elderly or had been injured in last April's earthquake, who were detained following three days of protests earlier in the week against the Chinese government's policies of reconstruction and allocation of land.<sup>10</sup> From April 1 through April 3, hundreds of Tibetans demonstrated in Gesar Square in Kyegu town, holding banners and signs with slogans, including "Fairly and legitimately resolve this issue," "Our land belongs to us," and "Help for the Yushu disaster area should put ordinary people's benefits first. This concerns people's lives. Reasonably plan the land of our lives." The same Tibetan sources reported that many people were hurt and injured when security personnel stepped in on April 3 to break up the demonstration.

The protests have resulted from local concerns over the government's reconstruction policies, which exclude Tibetans from the planning process, and the allocation of land. As many Tibetans work to re-establish their lives, Tibetan sources in exile with contacts in the Yushu area have told ICT that government authorities have claimed what the locals see as the best land area in the name of reconstruction, leaving many to worry over the fate of their own property and how it will be affected by the government's reconstruction plans. A western scholar who has visited the area cited local people's concerns with the houses being built by Chinese authorities. The scholar told ICT that the homes being built are featureless concrete blocks that are too small for many of the Tibetan families, which often include several generations living together. The scholar added that many see the reconstruction process as an excuse to move forward with the government's controversial campaign for nomad settlement, a long-term plan by the authorities which is being advanced in all areas of Tibet, intensifying poverty and leading to social and economic breakdown in many areas. "The issue of housing is a real problem, as well as the lack of involvement of locals in decision-making. The issue of relocation and settlement has always been a problem, even before the earthquake, now what has happened has exacerbated a lot of endemic frustration," said the scholar, adding, "the authorities are killing two birds with one stone, reconstruction after the earthquake and housing people in these places. It is grim."

A Tibetan researcher from Yushu TAP now living in exile provided ICT with a vivid example of how nomad resettlement is being carried out in a county neighboring Kyegu town, where a resettlement camp is under construction in a large grassland area near the main county town. Begun in 2010, the resettlement camp will hold between 3,000 and 5,000 former-nomad families. Construction was put on hold during winter, and is scheduled to restart later this month, with its completion scheduled for the end of the year. Local nomads were promised housing and a means to a better life, and had little choice other than to sell their livestock, which, as in many agricultural communities, was where they kept their wealth and provided a means for a sustainable life. Commenting on the project, the researcher said: "The Tibetans now see that the government promises were only half-truths, with all of the talk of improving their lives never materializing. Many of the Tibetans speak of wanting to go back to raising their livestock in the grasslands, but now they have nothing to go back to."

Dr. Andrew Fischer, a development economist specializing in Tibetan areas in the PRC, has written of the economic hardships faced by rural Tibetans seeking opportunities outside of the agricultural sector, a situation in which resettled nomads now find themselves: "The virtual absence of rural industry in Tibet... demonstrates the sheer neglect of a relevant and sustainable rural development strategy by the Chinese government in Tibet. As a result, rural Tibetans have had very few alternatives to farming and animal husbandry in the rural areas. The only option open to rural Tibetans seeking non-farm employment to supplement household incomes is to migrate to the urban areas and to compete for employment with the

more advantaged and preferred Chinese and Hui immigrants (Goldstein et al 36). Thus the sharp dichotomy between rural-agrarian and urban-industrial has sidelined the rural Tibetans from the rapid growth in the industrial and service sectors, and this has impacted their ability to respond to structural changes in the economy.”<sup>11</sup>

Local frustrations in Yushu have also been compounded by a lack of a constant supply of electricity in the surrounding area, according to the same western scholar. Electrical blackouts occur several times a day, lasting for hours at a time, creating a major disruption to local businesses and daily life, including cutting off internet service, making communication with the area particularly challenging.

While the rebuilding efforts in Yushu have focused on material reconstruction, the future of Yushu’s significant religious and cultural institutions remains in question.

The Gyanak mani, located only a few miles north of Kyegu town, was one of the largest, if not the largest, sacred Buddhist circumambulation site of its kind in Tibet and sustained significant damage during the earthquake. Made up of mani stones (stones or rocks on which mantras are inscribed), the site covers an area approximately 300 meters in length, 75 meters in width, and a height of 2.5 meters, creating a unique landscape of hills and walls of stones accumulated over the past two centuries. The site also featured several stupas, prayer-wheel chapels, and temples, which were all seriously damaged by the earthquake.

Despite setting aside US \$76.5 million for “renovating damaged cultural items” as part of the government reconstruction,<sup>12</sup> the western scholar who has traveled to the Kyegu area told ICT that little to nothing is currently being done by local authorities in terms of emergency restoration or providing safety measures around the site. “The problem is the non-locals [with authority] don’t respect local culture,” said the scholar. “The resilience and religious fervor of local Tibetans, however, have not diminished and hundreds of people continually circumambulate the sacred site as a daily popular practice aimed at the accretion of personal virtues and merits,” said the scholar.

Other institutions of significant cultural and religious importance, including Kyegu monastery, where most monks continue to live in tents, have not even begun to be restored.<sup>13</sup>

### **“Hope in a Disaster”**

The DVD film seized by the authorities, "Hope in a Disaster,"<sup>14</sup> features several senior lamas from the various schools of Tibetan Buddhism - as well as from the pre-Buddhist Bön faith - from all the Tibetan areas describing their reaction to the earthquake and advising the affected people on the best way to deal with the development. The lamas profiled in the documentary were from major Tibetan monasteries, including Tsurphu monastery, Drepung monastery and Labrang monastery. In a sequence of separate interviews, the lamas describe the assistance that their respective monastic communities have been rendering to the victims and survivors of the earthquake. Several of the lamas also stressed on the need to maintain local Tibetan cultural and architectural traditions during the reconstruction process, and that the economy should be rebuilt to maximize the strengths of local Tibetan industries and enterprises.

According to RFA’s reports, local government statements claimed that copies of the film were seized because the makers did not have official permission to distribute the DVD. Police reportedly confiscated several thousand copies from a monk’s residence along with computer equipment and other valuables including cash. Other copies were seized from restaurants in the area, although copies are still said to be circulating throughout Tibet.

A Tibetan researcher from the Yushu area who now lives in exile told ICT that the DVD, and those like it, are seen as sensitive by government officials, not because they contain illegal content, but because their focus is on the local and monastic relief efforts, that were a crucial part of the disaster response immediately following the earthquake. While official government representations of what happened in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake focused on the government and military's humanitarian response, the absence of official recognition of the contributions made by the Tibetan monastic and local communities was widely noted.<sup>15</sup>

## References:

[1] See: 'Bold protests in earthquake-hit area over government reconstruction plans,' ICT, April 9, 2011, <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/bold-protests-earthqu...> [1]

[2] The earthquake was measured as a magnitude 6.9 by the US Geological Survey, while the China Earthquake Administration (CEA) estimated it to be 7.1 in magnitude. Following the Sichuan earthquake of 2008, building codes were issued for schools to be able to withstand earthquakes up to magnitude 7.0, raising questions regarding the accuracy of the CEA measurement. For further analysis, see: <http://blogs.channel4.com/world-news-blog/confusion-over-the-size-of-chi...> [2]

[3] 'China puts final death toll from Qinghai quake at 2,698,' Xinhua, May 31, 2010, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/7006506.html> [3]

[4] 'Tents on the way for 100,000 homeless in quake-hit northwest China: ministry,' Xinhua, April 15, 2010, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-04/15/c\\_13252946.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-04/15/c_13252946.htm) [4]

[5] See: "'An eco-friendly tourist city': China's emerging reconstruction plans for Kyegu," ICT, May 5, 2010, <http://www.savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/%E2%80%9Ceco-friendly-tourist-city%E2%80%9D-china%E2%80%99s-emerging-reconstruction-plans-kyegu> [5]

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[10] See: 'Bold protests in earthquake-hit area over government reconstruction plans,' ICT, April 9, 2011, <http://savetibet.org/media-center/ict-news-reports/bold-protests-earthqu...> [10]

[11] See: pp. 53-54 'Poverty by Design: The Economics of Discrimination in Tibet,' by Andrew Fischer, Published by the Canada Tibet Committee, August 2002, <http://www.tibet.ca/media/PDF/PovertybyDesign.pdf> [11]

[12] 'Yushu protecting and passing on Tibetan traditional culture,' Xinhua, April 12, 2011, [http://qh.xinhuanet.com/2011-04/12/content\\_22498820.htm](http://qh.xinhuanet.com/2011-04/12/content_22498820.htm) [12]

[13] See: 'A year after quake, cultural relics remain shattered,' South China Morning Post, April 13, 2011, <http://www.scmp.com/portal/site/SCMP/menuitem.2af62ecb329d3d773349>

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[14] View online at [http://youtu.be/aq\\_sE\\_L1MuQ](http://youtu.be/aq_sE_L1MuQ) [13]

[15] For example, see: 'Tibetan monks' heroism absent in China quake portrayal,' AFP, April 22, 2010, <http://www.terraily.com/afp/100422072030.9iyj7fwa.html> [14]

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[2] <http://blogs.channel4.com/world-news-blog/confusion-over-the-size-of-chinas-latest-earthquake/10778>

[3] <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90882/7006506.html>

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