

TIBETAN CHILDREN IN CHINESE CUSTODY AFTER SHOOTING AT NANGPA PASS

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At least ten young children from the group of Tibetans who came under fire near the Tibetan border with Nepal on September 30 have been taken into Chinese custody, according to new eyewitness accounts from climbers on Mount Cho Oyu at the time. About half an hour after one of the Tibetan group, a 25-year old nun, was shot dead by Chinese security forces, a group of children apparently traveling with her was marched in single file through advance base camp at Mount Cho Oyu, according to witnesses.

Tibetan sources say that a young Tibetan boy may also have been killed when the group came under fire.

A British climber and several other witnesses, speaking on the phone from Nepal, described a tense and 'intimidating' atmosphere following the shooting as the armed security personnel 'took over' advance base camp at Cho Oyu, which is approximately 20 km west of Mount Everest at the border between Tibet and Nepal.

Additional reports from the Nangpa Pass area, which is at around 19,000 feet, indicate a stepping up of border security following the incident, with increased movements of troops towards the Tibetan border town of Tingri in the past 24 hours.

The British climber, police officer Steve Lawes, was among a group of climbers and Sherpas at Cho Oyu's base camp who witnessed both the shooting on September 30 and the subsequent capture of the Tibetan children who were among a larger group of more than 70 Tibetans crossing the glaciated Nangpa-la pass en route to Nepal and exile. Mr Lawes said that approximately half an hour after he and others had witnessed the group come under fire, a group of about 10 to 12 children, who seemed to be aged between six and ten years old, were marched into advance base camp by three soldiers with assault rifles¹. Mr Lawes said: "The children were in single file, about six feet away from me. They didn't see us - they weren't looking around the way kids normally would, they were too frightened. By that time, advance base camp was crawling with soldiers. They had pretty much taken over, and the atmosphere was very intimidating. We were doing our best not to do anything that might spark off more violence."

The shooting happened at around 10.30 am that morning. Mr Lawes said: "I saw a group of between 20 and 30 people on foot heading towards the Nangpa Pass. Then those of us at advance base camp heard two shots, which may have been warning shots. The group started to cross the glacier and there were more shots. We were probably around 300 yards away from the Chinese who were shooting. This time it definitely wasn't warning shots: the soldiers were putting their rifles to their shoulders, taking aim, and firing towards the group. One person fell, got up, but then fell again. We had a telescope with us but the soldiers took this. Later they used it to look at the dead body." Approximately 20 minutes after the shooting, according to Mr Lawes and fellow climbers, two of the military personnel went to check the body, but it was left lying on the pass for around 36 hours before it was taken away by security personnel. New accounts indicate that that a young Tibetan boy may also have been killed. It is not yet known whether other deaths occurred.

Several climbers confirmed that after the incident, advance base camp was taken over by the military. An American climber who wanted to remain anonymous because of his company's operations in China said: "The [soldiers] were very young guys, not very experienced, some of them only about 19 or 20 years old. Most of the climbers tried to keep a distance and the atmosphere was very tense."

The Nangpa Pass is commonly used as an escape route for Tibetans transiting into Nepal and from there to exile in India. Tibetans leaving Tibet along this route have been fired upon before by both Chinese and Nepalese security, on both sides of the border - in November 1998, a 15-year old Tibetan was shot dead near the border in Saga county, Shigatse prefecture in the Tibet Autonomous Region. But this is the first time that a Tibetan refugee has been shot dead in front of such a large number of witnesses from the inter-



A Tibetan refugee group en route into exile through the Nangpa Pass

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national mountaineering community - it is currently a peak climbing season and there were several hundred people making an ascent of Cho Oyu at the time. Of these, at least 40 climbers in addition to Sherpas and porters at advance base witnessed the incident.

Following the shooting, Chinese officials, including medical and military officers, apparently arrived in the area. Eyewitnesses reported that some of the group of Tibetans who had failed to reach Nepalese territory, including a young boy whose leg was apparently injured by the shooting, were taken into their vehicles and driven back to the Tibetan border towns.

The shooting is likely to have been carried out by out by the People's Armed Police, a paramilitary unit formed from the PLA in the early 1980s, which is responsible for internal security, border control, and protection of state installations, including prisons. The PAP, which is the main body that patrols the high mountain passes where Tibetans attempt to escape into Nepal, is under the control of both a government Ministry and the Party². Bases of the PAP in the region are all fortified, have detention capability, and are used when necessary by People's Liberation Army personnel. According to sources in the area, increased numbers of military personnel may now be being deployed in the region following the incident.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees apparently provided support for an employee of the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center to travel on October 9 to accompany the refugees to the Tibetan Refugees Reception Center. Tibetans traveling through Nepalese border areas to Kathmandu have been at increasing risk of refoulement (the return of persons to a country where they fear persecution) over the past two years due to China's strong trade and diplomatic ties with Nepal.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Witnesses described the guns as AK-47s, but weapons seen were more likely to be Chinese Type 81 Assault Rifles (copies of the AK-47 Kalashnikov, designed for short-range engagements), the principal automatic rifle used by the People's Liberation Army.

² There are two chains of Command for People's Armed Police. The Armed Police is simultaneously under the command of the CCP's Central Military Committee and the State Council. The armed police force headquarters falls under the direct jurisdiction of the government Ministry of Public Security, under Minister Zhou Yongkang.

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