

# The Spring Uprising in Tibet and China's Crackdown

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**APRIL, 2008, TIBET.** Nomads on horseback gallop down a rough trail towards a small town; a monk is seen raising his fist in the air, crying: “Return the Dalai Lama to Tibet!” The crowd around him roars its support. The blurred image shifts, and we see Tibetans tearing down a red Chinese flag, and raising the banned Tibetan national flag, two snow lions flanked by the Himalayan mountains.

The bold protest by the nomads and monks of Amchok Bora in eastern Tibet (which can be viewed on YouTube except in China), is one of the defining images of the protests that swept across the Tibetan plateau since March 10 when hundreds of monks took to the streets in Lhasa. This tidal wave of protests has been the most significant uprising against Chinese misrule in Tibet in more than half a century and has as yet unknown consequences for the Chinese government in Tibet. Since March, one or more protests have been reported in at least 52 county-level locations in Tibetan areas of China, as well as in Chengdu (the capital of Sichuan Province), Lanzhou (the capital of Gansu Province), and Beijing, where Tibetan students held a silent vigil for those harmed or killed in the crackdown.

A new cycle of protests was sparked by the repression that followed the March protests and by the implementation of an intensified ‘patriotic education’ campaign requiring pledges of allegiance to the Chinese government and the denunciation of the Dalai Lama. In a single instance in May, more than 80 nuns were imprisoned in the Tibetan area of



**Protests near Labrang Monastery, March 14th, 2008**

Kardze, Sichuan for peacefully protesting against the violent crackdown and calling for the Dalai Lama’s return to Tibet.

The Spring 2008 protests revealed fundamental flaws in the central government’s Tibet policy. Beijing has had decades of unfettered control in Tibet to deliver good governance compatible with the cultural priorities of the Tibetan people. By any measure, it has failed. While Beijing abandoned its Cultural Revolution era approach in most of China, in Tibet it has instituted new hardline policies that target the Tibetan Buddhist identity and its most visible leaders; patriotic education has become the tool of the Chinese propagandist, the Tibetan language has been downgraded in usage and replaced with Mandarin Chinese, and there is an increasing influx of Chinese migrants, further marginalising the Tibetan population — all of this done in the absence of safeguards that would protect traditional Tibetan livelihoods and the fragile environment.

In the Spring of 2008 the Tibetan people had reached a breaking point and in risking their lives to make their position known, they propelled Tibet to the top of the international news agenda, forcing governments and heads of state to view Tibet as an international issue, resolvable only through political means. The take-away message from the Tibetan protests was: The Dalai Lama, and not the Chinese state, represents our interests.

The Chinese government’s response to the protests has been a massive troop deployment across the Tibetan plateau.



**Chinese response to Lhasa protest, March 14th, 2008**

Monks and nuns have been the primary targets and monasteries were swiftly sealed and encircled by armed soldiers. Thousands of Tibetans from all walks of life have simply disappeared. Since early March, someone has disappeared from almost every Tibetan household in Lhasa, where people still sleep in their clothes, fearful of a knock on the door in the middle of the night. Many Tibetans have been taken to detention facilities far from their homes, and hundreds have been seen taken out of Lhasa on the new train to prisons in Qinghai province.

Yet, in the more than 125 protests across the Tibetan plateau since monks from Drepung monastery conducted their peaceful protest on March 10, only the outburst on March 14 in Lhasa appears to have escalated to serious violence and to have caused innocent deaths. Certainly, there were other incidents that resulted in damage to private property and targeted police stations or other symbols of the government's presence in Tibet. For example, it appears that thousands of Chinese flags were ripped down from poles and destroyed. There are no discernable numbers from official or other sources for Tibetans or police and other security personnel injured or killed in the protests.

In the weeks, now months, since the protests began, the Chinese government has sealed off much of Tibet from the outside world.

Tibet is at a turning point in its history and the future of the Tibetan people is in the balance. The Chinese leadership must reflect on the failures of its strategy for Tibet and the extent to which Tibetan grievances emerge from a deep-

seated sense of national identity and dispossession. It is in China's long term interest to recognize its role in the dynamics that led to the current instability across the Tibetan plateau.

The international community has an important role to play in ensuring that the Chinese government provides a full accounting of the Spring 2008 protests and their consequences, and moves forward in substantive, meaningful dialogue with the only legitimate representative of the Tibetan people, the Dalai Lama. Tibetans have put their lives on the line for nothing less than that.

For up to date reports on the evolving situation in Tibet, see <http://www.savetibet.org/news/insidetibet.php> <<http://www.savetibet.org/news/insidetibet.php>>. To join a free mailing list to receive these reports, send an email to: [press@savetibet.org](mailto:press@savetibet.org) <<mailto:press@savetibet.org>> with 'subscribe' in the subject header.