

10th MARCH 2010 – TIBETAN UPRISING DAY IN BRUSSELS, BELGIUM



The 10th of March 2010 in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and Europe.

Brussels was covered with a wonderful blue sky and it was sunny but very cold. Luckily it was dry. At 9.30 in the morning stewards and the police assembled at Kunstberg, near the Central Station. When the Brussels police gave approval and permission for this demonstration in the heart of the city, they also demanded stewards in order to guarantee safety during the protest, just like last year. The 20 stewards had to keep an eye on the participants of the march and report any kind of tension or form of aggression: 5 stewards of the Tibetan Community in Belgium, 5 of Regional Tibetan Youth Congress Belgium and 10 of "Vrienden van Tibet" ("Friends of Tibet"), the Tibet Support Group for the Dutch part of Belgium. As the Belgian government and several European institutions like the European Commission and the European Parliament are based in Brussels, protests are organised very often in the city, and it's common that the police requests stewards for big demonstrations. Now, as Tibetans are a peaceful people by nature, there were no problems or incidents at all during the demonstration. The stewards did a great job, also as far as the traffic was concerned, as the demonstration went through the centre of the city and we had to cross many busy intersections. Everything ran very smoothly.

More than 1000 Tibetans live in Belgium, and together with Switzerland it's the country with the most Tibetans in whole Europe. 410 people in total participated in the protest, Tibetans accompanied by Dutch and French speaking Tibet supporters.

The march in Brussels was organised by the Tibetan Community in Belgium, RTYC Belgium, Chusi Gangdruk Belgium, International Campaign for Tibet Brussels, "Vrienden van Tibet" and "Les Amis du Tibet" (the Tibet Support Group for the Frenchspeaking in Belgium). In a joint press release these 6 organisations demanded the following points:

- We urge the Chinese Authorities to stop accusing the Dalai Lama of being a 'separatist' and instead work with him to find a mutually acceptable solution to the Tibetan issue based on the Memorandum on genuine autonomy for the Tibetan people,
- We urge the Chinese leaders to stop the on-going repression in Tibet, to free all political prisoners and accept an international independent investigation into the 2008 events,
- We call the President of the European Council Mr. Herman Van Rompuy and the EU High Representative for External Relations Lady Ashton to follow President Obama's example and invite the Dalai Lama to meet in Europe and develop a coordinated EU Foreign Policy on Tibet,

- We call the European Commission to support development and civil society projects in favor of Tibetan population in Tibet and Tibetan refugees in exile (India, Nepal, Bhutan) in economic and social fields such as health and nutrition, livelihoods and education, access to job, gender issues, environment and revitalization of settlements,
- We urge EU Institutions and the International Community to explore multinational mechanisms to work collaboratively on the challenges of climate change and environmental degradation in Tibet, the so-called Third Pole, including with the direct participation of Tibetan stakeholders.

During the briefing of the stewards about the security, the traffic etc., more and more people assembled. In a short time Kunstberg, the place where the demonstration started, changed in massively many Tibetan flags and people. A sea of banners, posters and inscriptions made it colourful, full of supporters and messages. "Vrienden van Tibet" shared stickers of the organisation among all the participants.

At first, the President of the Tibetan Community in Belgium welcomed all the participants and gave a speech. Mr. Tsaye Kelsang referred to what happened in Lhasa at 10th March 1959 and emphasized the importance of this demonstration. He also called upon all Tibetans living in Belgium to participate in the demonstration each year. On behalf of the Tibetan Community in Belgium, Mr. Kelsang expressed his appreciation for the great work that has been done to organise this protest by several Tibet organisations. He also called upon all groups to continue to work together. Afterwards the Tibetan National Anthem was sung followed by one minute of silence to commemorate all the Tibetan brothers and sisters who lost their lives during the 60 years of Chinese oppression. Already more than 1.2 million Tibetans have died in that period and the Tibetan people are still suffering very much under the Chinese rule.

Around 10.30 the demonstrators lined up. In front of the demonstration behind the police, a "Free Tibet van" drove, with several Tibetan flags on it. Since two years "Game's over, Free Tibet" is painted on the front of the car, with the banner of the Olympic Games in 2008 in Beijing. Behind this car two Tibetans carrying a big poster of H.H. the Dalai Lama, as an expression of their respect and support for their leader. Hundreds of demonstrators followed.

The first part of the demonstration was a march from Kunstberg to the European Commission, through the centre of the city. As March 10 was on a working day and the demonstration was planned during business hours, the protest caught a lot of attention by the inhabitants, office workers and people who passed by. Hundreds of leaflets with information about Tibet and the reason why the demonstration took place were handed over to passers-by.

On the dozens and dozens of banners we could read different kinds of messages. The main topic was the lack of freedom and human rights in Tibet:

"Respect human rights in Tibet"

"Justice for Tibet, we speak for the voiceless Tibetans in Tibet"

"China stop the oppression in Tibet"

"Release all political prisoners in Tibet"

"Stop oppression-torture-poverty-discrimination in Tibet".

After a walk of more than one hour the group reached the European Commission at 11.45. In front of the E.C. a stage was built for the speeches by several personalities. Mrs. Inge Hermans, the President of "Vrienden van Tibet", did the presentation and announced the speakers. First of all Mr. Tashi Wangdi of the Office of Tibet expressed his gratitude to all participants of the demonstration and he found it a hopeful sign that so many people joined the protest. *"It shows that Tibet is not forgotten"*. Afterwards the message of H.H. the Dalai Lama at the occasion of the 51st Uprising Day was read by Mr. Wangdi, the official representative of the Dalai Lama. Since January 2009 the Office of Tibet in Brussels is the mail office in Europe.

The next speakers were Belgian politicians of various political parties: Mr. Pol Van den Driessche of CD&V, Mr. Xavier Baeselen of MR, Mrs. Juliette Boulet of Ecolo, Mr. Mark Hendrickx of N-VA, Mr. Georges Dallemagne of CDH and Mr. Geert Lambert of Groen!. It was heart warming to hear that so many politicians of many different political parties showed their concern for Tibet. This shows that the Tibetan case is a general human question and not linked to a specific political intent or vision.

Mr. Mark Hendrickx of N-VA stated: *"The spirit of peaceful yet continuous resistance against the brutal Chinese oppression that has been the core of the Tibetan freedom movement provided inspiration and hope for similar movements all over the world". "National pride and struggle for self-determination have always been meant to be liberating and uniting. It is the example of Tibet that reminds us of that fact. We, the Western democracies, should for this reason alone honor the exiled Tibetan representatives by receiving them with all égards. Intimidation from the Chinese oppressor can never be a valid reason for forsaking our duty as democracies and democrats towards Tibet".*

Mr. Thomas Mann, the President of the Tibet Intergroup within the European Parliament, was excused for the demonstration because he was abroad, but his assistant Mr. Marco Reuter read his message: *"The European Parliament urges the Chinese government to release all people imprisoned during the riots in 2008 as well as a change to a serious commitment to peace". "The big majority in the European Parliament supports H.H. the Dalai Lama on his middleway approach and the right of the Tibetan people for cultural and religious autonomy". "As President of the Tibet Intergroup I can assure you that we have always been a huge backer of dialogue, peace and friendship. On our regular meetings we invite experts from all over the world to inform about the actual situation of prisoners, monks and nuns as well as refugees. Because of our initiatives and political actions our voice seems to be important. The re-establishment of the Tbet Intergroup for the new legislation was a success. 120 members of the European Parliament have given their support by signing for the continuation of our work". "Since last year there is a very important initiative by our Tibetan friends: a Memorandum about the situation of Tibetan people within Chinese constitution. It is absolutely clear that is no demand for separation. A real genuine autonomy is an incredibly important factor for the future of the Tibetan people to protect and preserve their identity, language, religion and tradition. The European Parliament clearly supports this document as essential". "It was a matter of great concern when recently the Spanish EU presidency remarked that it could imagine lifting the Arms Embargo with China. The establishment of the Tibet Intergroup 20 years ago coincided with the imposition of this embargo against the People's Republic of China. Its maintenance down to the present day is one of the biggest successes of our parliamentary work. It has to be retained since there is no progress on the situation of human rights in China". "Let`s stay together. Let`s work together. Let`s protest together for humanity".*

Before and after their speech the politicians also gave several interviews to the press.

Around 13.00 the group left the European Commission for an impressive march to the Chinese embassy, a walk of one hour and 40 minutes. Like the march in the morning a lot of slogans were shouted all the way again:

"Free Tibet, save Tibet"

"Long live the Dalai Lama"

"One world one dream free Tibet free Tibet"

"No human rights in Tibet"

"What we want: we want freedom"

"Tibet belongs to Tibetans"

"Red Chinese go back"

"Shame shame China shame"

"They are the butcher" and "They are the liar"

"No genocide in Tibet"
"Release release Panchen Lama"
"Wake up wake up UNO"
"No religious freedom in Tibet".

The demonstration in front of the Chinese embassy lasted 45 minutes. Lots of policemen stood at the entrance and nearby the embassy, and barbed wire was placed close to the gate. Of course the policemen didn't had no problems with the demonstrators, the protest was peaceful. The demonstration was ended by singing the Tibetan National Anthem and an Uprising song.

During protests in front of the Chinese embassy it's also the Chinese habit to take pictures or videos of the people who demonstrate. On March 10 in Brussels the demonstrators of the peaceful demonstration were not only watched by the police and the employees at the Chinese embassy, but also by some Chinese "friends" with cameras who followed the demonstration all day. They kept an eye on everything and probably everyone, walked at the side listening to what people told, and they even dared to speak with several demonstrators, especially westerners, in order to obtain all kinds of information: *"were you ever in Tibet, and why not?"*, *"who organised this protest?"*, *"who is the main responsible person of the demonstration?"*, *"are you a member or board member of one of the associations that organised this protest?"*, *"who finances your Tibet organisation?"* etc. Yes, "Big Brother" China is watching and listening really everywhere. In this way some people at the demonstration to who the Chinese spoke to, got a small idea about how life in China must be, and how the Chinese try to get information of what they call "separatist organisations that undermine the stability of the People's Republic of China". The Chinese introduced themselves as being "reporters of European Press" who came to the demonstration to write a report. If they were asked for their identification in the form of their business card, they could not show anything. At the friendly request to send their article when it's finished, a fake name, fake e-mail address and fake telephone number were given. All this is another very clear example of the Chinese way of behaving and the shameless techniques they use.

With this in mind we can only think of the poor Tibetan people in their own country who have to undergo so much more controls and sufferings under the Chinese rule and dictatorship. Our thoughts and our mind are with all Tibetans everywhere in the world, together with our heart. We can only keep on hoping and praying that all inhabitants in China get more freedom, that human rights are respected and that the people can live a better and a more human way of life. United we stand for Tibet and we never give up until Tibetans get their freedom back. This day will come, definitely, there's no doubt about that. FREE TIBET.

Dennis Barbion.

