

Lhasa, 27.04.2008

The following letter was written by a resident in Lhasa, who wishes to remain anonymous, and gives a personal account of the current environment in the city:

Yesterday it was quite hot outside and the military that were guarding one of the petrol stations was protected by a big umbrella from the intense sunrays. Today it's the opposite; cold, cloudy and even quick snowfalls as storm fronts hover on the mountains and sometimes close in on the valley. Like the weather here in Lhasa the rules are changing too. One day you can go nearly everywhere, the next, military checkpoints won't let you pass. At the beginning of last week it seemed life was getting back to normal. Guards at the checkpoints relaxed and they seemed not as serious anymore, and overall, there was less military on the streets. But then suddenly heavy military presence was back. A few days ago, in the evening, I walked up Beijing Road. As I did, many military trucks passed me and there were patrols everywhere, only a few cars were to be seen driving around and the streets were near empty of civilian people. The atmosphere was tense and made the young, normally childish looking military, suddenly look scary.

It is difficult to describe Lhasa these days, because you can only see a fraction of what is really going on. If you quickly glance at the city it may seem normal except for the old Tibetan centre, east of the Potala Palace. In the centre, military has occupied every intersection and stand on every side street, diligently checking your identity card. Even the tiniest of alleyways have at least four military personnel, of whom at least one has a bayonet and all of them a shield, a bat and a helmet. The bigger intersections have more military and people often have to line up in order to get checked. Ethnic Chinese can pass these checkpoints much easier than local Tibetans. Tibetans living at Dromsikhang and the Barkhor need a special, police issued paper in order to be allowed to go in and out the immediate area surrounding their homes.

The square in front of the holiest Tibetan Temple, the Jokhang, normally a sea of people, prostrating, circumambulating and socialising, is now completely empty. In front of the square two military in blue uniforms strictly ensure nobody walks on the square. As back up, in case they miss a person, military in green suddenly appear out of no where to apprehend and push back person's entering these normally public areas. The round pedestrian street circling the Jokhang is empty too. Only people living in this area are allowed to pass, forbidden to do religious Koras around the Jokhang, and instead on the normally bustling retail and religious lanes you can only find small children playing football and other games, trying to get on with life, behind the military guards on these silent streets.

On Beijing Road and Sera Road the government has initiated road works. Sections of road are being dug up and replaced where cars were burnt during the March 14 protests leaving black tarmac. Sidewalks on Beijing Road are being repaved as well after protesters used the pavement stones to throw and break shop windows. As you walk through Lhasa, you can still see many burnt or damaged shops. On Beijing Road alone, there are around 16 shops or shopping complexes burnt out, one of them being the Bank of China and one a jewellery store.

Not only are roads and shops getting rebuilt, but also some old, traditional Tibetan houses.

If you look complacently around town you may think there is not a heavy military presence anymore. However, if you look in every hotel and building courtyard and in windows, you see these areas covered in military; trucks, tents and more often the military themselves exercising. Wherever there is space, you find military. They are hidden in any empty building, behind buildings and even in the hospital courtyard of Lhasa City Peoples Hospital.

Walking the streets of Lhasa, seeing big tea houses unusually empty and many shops still closed, it makes you aware of how scared people are these days. Very few people stop on the street when they meet friends, because every gathering of people is suspicious. A lot of people still stay at home because they are scared they will get arrested for no reason if they go out.

When you finally find someone not too scared to talk to you, you hear consistent, dramatic, disturbing and daunting stories that give you nightmares. But since they don't have proof of what happened, it is difficult to inform the media. From the 14th of March 2008, there has been a heavy military presence in addition to the original security cameras which all monitor the city so people were too scared to take photographs of the tanks in front of the Jokhang Temple and elsewhere in town. And since all the dead bodies got immediately carried away by the military or taken from peoples home during nightly military raids, nobody can prove their brother, relative or friend died, all they can confirm is that this person disappeared. Only rumours about the death toll and the arrested people are anxiously passed from person to person.

Yesterday I talked to a Tibetan man who was speaking for himself and his friends who want the world to know what is going on here. He asked me if I can pass all the information he has on to foreign media, so people here get help and don't have to be so scared anymore.

By talking to me he risks being arrested and being tortured in prison, but he seems desperate enough to not care about that. In order to protect him, his family and friends and also myself, I don't want to tell more details about the place we met, his age or job. But that is what he told me:

“On March 14th in the afternoon we heard that there were demonstrations going on in front of Ramoche Temple. Later we saw four people dragging a person who was shot dead in front of the Jokhang and that was when we became really scared. Normally the government should use gas or water against protesters, but here they shoot them. So we went home as fast as possible.

In the evening my wife went to pick up our child from school around 6p.m. At that time the military was already on Jiansu Road where the school was. The military was shooting at the locals who went to pick up their children. One woman got shot in her leg and one man was hit in the head or neck and he died. Later his brother wanted to get his corpse from the hospital, but the hospital didn't want to give it out. Finally the brother got so desperate that he threatened to burn himself and the hospital if they didn't give his dead brother to his family. The hospital gave him his brother's body, but just a few hours after they came home the military came and took the dead body away.

After March 14th whenever somebody died, you had to get three different papers in order to be allowed to bring the dead body to the sky burial place. If you didn't have these papers you got pushed back inside your house with the dead body by the army; a very bad omen in Tibetan culture. These three papers one needed were from the local police, the hospital and a lawyer. The reason for this was that with this rule the government made sure that everybody who didn't die under normal circumstances was found and taken away from the family, so

nobody can make pictures and show them to friends or journalists outside Tibet. The problem for the people was that all the offices were closed during these days and therefore nobody could bring their dead family members to the sky burial place on the days they should have according to Tibetan astrology.

On March 14, 15 and 16 military came around midnight to check the homes in our area for pictures of the Dalai Lama, and took everybody with them who didn't have an identity card. They also had with them pictures of people who were in the demonstrations and they compared them with our faces. About 50 military men with guns came to our home and searched everything. We stayed at home for three days, only going out to go to the toilet and we only had Tsampa to eat, and people whose home ran out of gas even couldn't boil water. The gate to our house complex was closed and there were army posted in front of it. If you went out, you got beaten up quite badly by them. After three days everybody who worked for the government got a phone call and had to go back to work. Without this working permit we were still not allowed to go out. I know at least seven people who got arrested and one who got shot.

When the foreign journalists were in Lhasa, I think it was from 27th to 29th of March, the military suddenly disappeared from the streets. Instead of wearing their military uniform they changed into traffic police, gatekeeper uniforms or civil dress and they were hiding inside buildings and behind corners where the journalists couldn't see them. We were suddenly allowed to go everywhere; there were no checkpoints during these days. When the journalists were allowed to walk around by themselves, officials in normal clothes or traditional dress followed them, answered their questions and made pictures of individuals who talked to the press. We wanted to tell the press what is going on here in reality, behind this show that was made up for them, but we didn't have any chance to get close to them without being punished for that later. When we finally heard that the Jokhang monks told them the truth we were very happy.

The pilgrims inside the Jokhang temple were all elderly officials who were forced to go there for pilgrimage on this day. Normally these people are not allowed to engage in any religious activities, but on this day they had to go. And lot of the other officials were given leave from their office and were told to go to the Barkhor and the Potala, if possible with their families, so it looks like there is lot of freedom in Lhasa.

After the journalists left the military came back into public immediately and we heard that the Jokhang monks got arrested for their statements in front of the media and officials two days later.

Between 17th and 20th of April most of the monks were taken away from Sera to an unknown place. Sera Monastery normally has over 300 monks but now there is only a handful left who care for the chapels. Around midnight about fifteen to twenty military trucks came and detained the monks. We have this information from inside the monastery and also from an abutting owner. But we don't know what is happening in Drepung and Ganden, two of the biggest monastic centres around Lhasa, but we have heard they have been arrested and taken out of Lhasa.

From the monasteries around Lhasa a lot of monks and nuns got taken away too and the ones who are still at their monastery are under house arrest. We think the government is scared that when the Olympic flame is in Lhasa there will be new protests by the monks and nuns, that's why they detain them. They took all of them, no matter if they protested on March 10th

and the following days or not, only chapel keepers, drivers and a few other monastery workers are allowed to stay in the monasteries.

Lately there are only a few monks to be seen on the streets. It is dangerous for them, because on the Tibetan TV channel they said that for every suspicious person you report to the police you will get RMB20000. In reality you only get about RMB2000 but still people call when they see monk or nuns.

Since last week all Tibetans who are not from Lhasa have to go back to their homeland, except students and teachers studying at government schools. The police come to your home and send you out of Lhasa if you are not from here. When the Olympic Torch is in Lhasa only local people and Chinese are allowed to be here. They did that few years ago too during the 50 year peaceful liberation celebration.

There is a big problem in jail now. There is not enough food, not enough water and not enough blankets. The prisoners have to sleep on the ground and sometimes they only get one cup of water a day and nothing else. This way they get health problems, their bodies get really weak and they die, either in prison or after they get released. The prisoners get beaten up very badly. They especially beat the kidney, liver and gall region so prisoners get internal injuries and slowly die. We know this from three friends who just got released from prison.

We are so worried about our friends and family members who are in prison. We need to help them, but we don't know what to do. That's why we have to tell the foreigners so the world will get to know and help us.

It is still very tight here in Lhasa. Without ID cards you cannot go out and if you live at Dromsikhang or Barkhor you need a special paper. Wherever there is a gathering or argument people get arrested.

At the schools and in the offices people have to write stories about the 14th of March and they have to speak ill of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. When they write about the Dalai Lama they are only allowed to write Dalai, otherwise they have to write it again. My child already had to write such stories three times.

We are scared and worried about the prisoners. After the demonstrations, I saw some military vehicles like they use in the Iraq war, the same vehicles I saw in the news about Iraq [Tanks] but they were in our city. I thought these vehicles are only allowed in war between two countries. On the Tibetan TV News one presenter said that the military did a very good job since this was their first experience with something like war and a good opportunity for them to practise how to shoot and how to kill people.

Now they already started the preparations for the Olympic Flame to come here. They are putting up decorations on the Potala and Jokhang Square [big Olympic Rings were set up in front of Jokhang and removed again yesterday evening]".

What this man told me, I have also heard from other people without connections to him.

I have no doubt the Chinese government will forbid foreign tourists from visiting here for the next few months. Tibetans want a chance to tell their side of the story; they try to tell you what happened to them. They know they need help from outside and therefore I believe, by preventing tourism, the government has a way of controlling, censoring and suppressing the situation here.

What has happened and continues to happen in Lhasa is extremely sad and scary. Never before have I heard monks talking about methods of torture used in local prisons and different gun types that were used by military during this year's demonstrations in Lhasa. And never before have I seen Tibetan people so desperate and angry that they do things they know they will die for or be put in prison for a long time.

With the up and coming Labour Day Celebration and Torch Relay in May anxiety has increased in Lhasa and fear of citywide house arrest has resulted in the stockpiling of food.

Every day you see people arguing with army at checkpoints. A father and daughter wanted to pass a checkpoint however the military personnel told the man he was permitted but his daughter, who is not old enough to have an identity card, was refused access due to not having one.

But even in this difficult time you still see brave and good actions. Yesterday I saw a little boy, around one or two years old; that I believed displayed a good example of Tibetan spirit. The baby looked as if he had just learnt how to walk and was out with his grandmother and her little dog. They were standing in front of the Jokhang Square where military in blue ensures nobody crosses the square. The baby walked up the three steps to the square and started to make prostrations towards the Jokhang while his grandmother also prayed but her frail body prevented her from prostrating as well. When the boy finished he looked at the guards, then at his grandmother, and then started to walk closer to the temple. The guards looked at the baby, not knowing what to do. After about ten meters the baby boy stopped and prostrated again, then turned around, walked back to one of the guards and took his hand to say goodbye. Seeing this reminded me that all Tibetan people want is religious freedom and the right to preserve their culture.

They are tired of writing papers against the Dalai Lama, of patriotic re-education and all the rules and regulations that make their life so difficult.

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