30 Years of Resistance: The Legacy of the 1987 Lhasa Protests

Thematic Report
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Introduction

On 7 March 1989, a decree imposing martial law on Lhasa was issued by Chinese Premier Li Peng and China’s State Council. This move by Beijing firmly brought about a halt to a significant period of protest against Chinese rule in Tibet, led by monks from all three major monasteries in Lhasa: Sera Monastery, Drepung Monastery and Ganden Monastery.

Until the protests in Lhasa in late 1987, carried out by the monks from Sera, Drepung and Ganden, Tibet had been a country forced into submission. When China started to invade in 1950, Tibetans all over Tibet resisted in various ways, including an armed resistance in eastern Tibet. The uprising in Lhasa in 1959 was crushed, however, and Tibet’s fate was sealed, despite armed resistance continuing with covert support from the USA. After the Dalai Lama fled to exile in India in 1959, Tibet was closed off to the outside world for over two decades.

The turbulent periods that shook China also shook Tibet, such as the Cultural Revolution which started in 1966 and lasted for ten years. Even before the Cultural Revolution had started though, all but 70 of the 2,500 monasteries in central Tibet had been closed for at least three years.¹

In 1978, the Chinese leadership, now under Deng Xiaoping following the death of Mao, changed policy and acknowledged some of its previous errors. In late 1979, a Tibetan delegation from Dharamsala, which included the Dalai Lama’s elder brother, Gyalo Dhondup, was allowed to visit Tibet. Miscalculating the feelings of the Tibetan people, Ren Rong, then Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, had reported that there was no longer any support for the Dalai Lama and that Tibetans supported Communism. However, as the delegation reached Lhasa, “tens of thousands of Lhasa Tibetans mobbed the delegation in a huge display of affection and jubilation. Braving arrest, Tibetans in the crowd shouted out ‘Long live the Dalai Lama’ and ‘Tibet is independent’.”² Subsequent visits from fact-finding delegations provoked a similar response and the fourth one, scheduled to leave in August 1980, was indefinitely postponed by China.

The next key turning point was a visit to Tibet by a Chinese central government delegation in May 1980, led by Party Secretary General and Politburo Standing Committee member Hu Yaobang. According to American scholar Ronald D Schwartz, Hu was shocked by what he found. He went on to make a series of recommendations for a new policy which then became the basis for the reforms in Tibet during the 1980s.³

This period of leniency in the 1980s was significant: “Many Tibetan religious and traditional customs were allowed again. A significant number of Tibetans were allowed to take up positions of some social status, to obtain education in universities, to study Tibetan culture, to travel abroad, and even, until 1985, to travel to India to meet the Dalai Lama. Tourism was permitted, and the Tibetan language was encouraged in primary schools. Publications in Tibetan boomed, monasteries reopened, and foreign films were shown on television.”⁴

In 1980 Ren Rong was replaced by long-time PLA Commissar in Tibet Yin Fatang. In 1985 Yin Fatang was replaced by outsider and reformer Wu Jinghua, a protégé of Hu Yaobang’s. As Ronald D Schwartz notes, “Wu was committed to implementing the policy of ‘openness and reform’ in Tibet, and supported programmes to restore Tibetan culture, religion, and language.”⁵

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
Tourism boomed during this period. Citing official Chinese statistics, the New York Times reported in April 1988 that 43,500 foreigners visited Tibet in 1987, spending more than USD 15 million.\(^6\) New luxury hotels were built in Lhasa by international companies such as the Holiday Inn.

According to Robert Barnett, “the reforms did create an opportunity for rebuilding from the ground up the rudiments of a Tibetan civil society devastated by two decades of communism.”\(^7\)

The first three protests against Chinese rule in Lhasa were led by local monks and all took place within a ten-day period in the autumn of 1987. This report covers those protests and the subsequent ones which continued until Martial Law was decreed in March 1989.

Hu Jintao, then Party Secretary of the Tibet Autonomous Region, issued five subsequent Martial Law Decrees in Lhasa over the next few days after the initial decree on 7 March 1989. Troops from the People’s Liberation Army poured into Lhasa that month, imposing checkpoints every few metres in the city. Prisoners were rounded up and given harsh sentences. Foreigners were expelled. Although martial law was to rule the city for 13 months, it was unable to quell protests for long.

While the Lhasa protests of 1989 are fairly well known and leaked CCTV footage of the brutality of China’s response circulated internationally, less is known, generally, about the protests that originated in September 1987 and continued throughout 1988. However, photographic documentation does exist from these protests although, so far, very little of it has been made public, mainly for security reasons.

A few years ago a set of photographs taken during the 1987 and 1988 protests was acquired by one of Tibet Watch’s researchers from a late relative who had previously worked in the Department of Security in the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). There were no notes or any other information left with the photographs so the research team’s first step was to try and find out who had taken them and whether any of them had been published before. It soon became clear that many of the images were unpublished and that we potentially had an opportunity to share new material from some of the earliest protests of the 1980s.

It was equally clear, however, that these photographs could not simply be published without additional research and verification. We wanted to find out the story behind each of the images but we also wanted to find out whether any of the individuals in the photographs were still alive and whether they or their families would be affected by publication. Some of the photographs from the original set have been withheld as a result of that investigation.

Throughout this process we worked closely with the CTA’s Department of Security, who recently provided some additional images, and with the Gu Chu Sum Movement Association of Tibet. We would like to thank them both for their cooperation and their input to this report.

In addition to researching the photographs, Tibet Watch has been able to interview eyewitnesses and participants of the protests and hopes to present, through images and text, a comprehensive account of the turbulent and historic period in Lhasa between September 1987 and March 1989.

Please note that some of the images are graphic in nature and some readers may find them upsetting.

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Key events and locations

Timeline of key events

1987

21 Sep: Five-Point Peace Plan for Tibet unveiled by the Dalai Lama; rejected by China two days later
27 Sep: Protest led by monks from Drepung Monastery
01 Oct: Protest led by monks from Sera Monastery
06 Oct: Protest led by monks from Drepung Monastery

1988

24 Feb - 5 Mar: Monlam Prayer Festival in Lhasa
5 Mar: Protest led by monks from Ganden Monastery
Summer: Drepung Manifesto published
10 Dec: Coordinated protest

1989

Jan: Wu Jinghua replaced by Hu Jintao as Party Secretary in the TAR
5-7 Mar: Ongoing protest
7 Mar: Martial law declared in Lhasa
10 Dec: Dalai Lama awarded the Nobel Peace Prize

Maps of Tibet

The map above shows Tibet in relation to neighbouring countries. The two maps below show Tibet’s traditional provinces (left) and Tibet as currently divided by China (right). Tibet’s capital, Lhasa, is highlighted on both.
Lhasa

The protests of 1987-89 took place in Tibet’s capital city, Lhasa. The map below shows key locations in the Lhasa area including the Jokhang Temple and the main monasteries involved in protests. Drepung, Sera and Ganden are known as the three great monasteries of the Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism. The Jokhang Temple is the most sacred temple in Tibet and the heart around which the city of Lhasa is built. The Jokhang and the surrounding Barkhor area were the site of all the major protests outlined in this report.

The map below shows the Barkhor, highlighted in blue. This is the route which runs around the Jokhang Temple. It is part of the major pilgrimage route in Lhasa and is also home to many shops and small restaurants.
1987 Protests

In the days leading up to the first protest, China flatly rejected a peace proposal put forward by the Dalai Lama. The Five-Point Peace Plan for Tibet was unveiled on 21 September during the Dalai Lama’s address to the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus. Two days later, on 23 September, Beijing rejected the proposal, with a foreign ministry spokesperson announcing: “We are opposed to Dalai’s engagement and activities anywhere and in any form aimed to split China”.

The following day, 24 September, 15,000 Tibetans in Lhasa were forced to attend a public rally where 11 Tibetans received sentences for supposed criminal offences. Two of them were sentenced to death and executed. Then, on 25 September, local television in Lhasa showed images of the Dalai Lama in the US accompanied by strong condemnation from the Chinese authorities. After this, hand printed posters started to appear around the Barkhor stating support for the Dalai Lama.

27 September

The first protest to take place after the relatively quiet and open preceding few years was carried out by a group of 21 monks from Lhasa’s Drepung Monastery. The young monks had seen Chinese state media’s critical coverage of the Dalai Lama’s trip to the US and decided to do something to show their support. Starting very early in the morning, in order to escape attention, they walked from Drepung Monastery to Lhasa and gathered in a tea house before embarking on a circuit of the Barkhor at around 9am. They carried a Tibetan national flag hand drawn on a piece of cotton. The slogans they shouted included “Tibet is independent” and “May the Dalai Lama live ten thousand years”. They were gradually joined by a crowd of around 100 lay people.

Among the group of Drepung monks was Ngawang Woebar. Then 22 years old, Ngawang Woebar now lives in exile and is one of the founders of the Gu Chu Sum Movement Association of Tibet. He says of that day:

“After we were marching into the street and around the Barkhor, kids were running after us, young people were looking at us in curiosity, and some elderly people were afraid when they saw us as they had faced so much trouble in the past, such as during the Cultural Revolution. Some old people were praying with their palms clasped together. Many of these people were begging, in tears, for us to run away to avoid arrest. Gradually more and more people joined us.

Following our arrival at the TAR government gate, 21 monks, including myself, along with one girl and four men, were arrested by the Chinese police and army. After over four months in prison, we were released temporarily thanks to an intervention by the Tenth Panchen Lama.”

Even though the 21 monks were arrested along with five lay people, that day of the first protest the crowd was dispersed without violence. The following day, 28 September, two foreigners in Lhasa were arrested for having Tibetan flags on their bags.

8 The Caucus was renamed the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in 2008 following the death of its founder, Tom Lantos.
9 Gu Chu Sum was established by former political prisoners in Dharamsala, India, on 27 September 1991, the fourth anniversary of the first 1987 protest. The name was derived from the months when the first key protests took place. Gu, Chu and Sum are Tibetan numbers 9, 10 and 3, representing September and October of 1987 and March of 1988.
10 Testimony from Ngawang Woebar, interviewed by the Tibet Watch research team in Dharamsala, 2017.
1 October

Four days after the first protest, a group of 23 monks from Lhasa’s Sera Monastery protested on the symbolic date of China’s National Day, 1 October. They also carried a Tibetan flag and made circuits around the Barkhor while shouting slogans for Tibet’s independence. Another demand made by these protesters was that the Drepung monks who had protested and been arrested in September should be released. This protest had initially been organised by monks from Sera Monastery but they were joined by monks from the Jokhang Temple and Nechung Monastery. This group was then joined by around 50 lay Tibetans and the crowd grew as they made circuits around the Barkhor. By the fourth circuit, police came to break up the protest and the monks and around 30 lay people were arrested and taken to the police station at the southwest corner of the Jokhang square. A crowd of 2,000-3,000 people gathered outside this police station, demanding the release of those arrested, leading to chaotic scenes. Women and children threw rocks at the police while the crowd overturned police vehicles and set fire to them. The police station was also set on fire and some young monks led by Champa Tenzin, a monk in his forties from the Jokhang, seized the opportunity to run into the compound. After ten minutes, Champa Tenzin emerged from the side of the building with badly burned arms and a number of the arrested monks following after him. Three were shot dead as they ran into the crowd but the rest escaped. Champa Tenzin, hailed as a hero, was carried by the crowd around the Barkhor.

According to Schwartz, around 50 foreigners witnessed the demonstration; some of them were even in the middle of the crowd. Quite a few of them took photographs. In his book, “Lhasa: Streets with Memories”, Robert Barnett gives a vivid eye witness account of that day:

“The police station was now in flames from where the crowd had torched the door to force entrance to the building. The plainclothesmen lurking in the crowd had long since been kicked and beaten and thrown out, and the monk-demonstrators arrested earlier that day were escaping through the smoke-filled windows. […]

At the far end of the Barkhor Square I could see truckloads of troops waiting for orders to advance. There was no attempt by the demonstrators to force the police farther away than the edge of the square […]

Knowing little of the history unfolding before us, we Westerners worried instead about how bad the end was going to be. We could see men in green moving on the flat rooftops behind the police station, beyond the range of stones. […]

[Shots begin to be fired]

I ran from the Shingra alcove across the southern Barkhor to the doorway of the primary school on the far side of the police station. […] As I reached the school I saw the monk Champa Tenzin from the Jokhang being carried on the shoulders of the crowd, the hero of the moment for having led the rescue of the prisoners from the flaming police station.”

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The photograph above, which shows Champa Tenzin being hailed by the crowd, was taken on the day by John Ackerly and has since become one of the most iconic images of the 1980s protests. John Ackerly went on to become a key figure in the Tibet movement and remains on the board of the International Campaign for Tibet. The protest went on for several more hours and the police shot into the crowd, killing between six and 20 Tibetans. Schwartz writes that five foreigners were arrested that day for taking pictures and had their film taken away. Three of them had their passports and cameras impounded for two days.

According to an eyewitness account by Robert Barnett and Nicholas Meysztowicz, “many Tibetans were elated by the demonstration on 1 October. [...] It was, after years of strict control, an epoch-making event, and Tibetans were not slow to recognise it. ‘Things have changed’, one woman said to us, ‘In 1959 it was the Khampas who were brave. Now it is us, the Lhasa people. We will fight.’ Another student in a teahouse said, ‘It was wonderful. I never realised what we could do. I did not know we could fight the Chinese. I wish to do it again.’”

The actions of the Drepung and Sera monks were also inspiring others. The monks at Ganden Monastery, the third major monastery of Lhasa and, at 32km east, also the furthest away from the city, heard about the protests and felt it was their turn. Venerable (Ven.) Bagdro\(^\text{13}\) of Ganden Monastery recalls:

> “On 27 September 1987 monks from Drepung monastery near Lhasa came out and demonstrated against the Chinese. This was followed four days later on 1 October by another demonstration led by the monks from Sera monastery, also very near to Lhasa. On the radio of the Chinese news service the monks at Ganden heard about these protests and were inspired. We planned our uprising for five months later, on 5 March.”\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{12}\) Robert Barnett and Nicholas Meysztowicz, *The Lhasa Riot and After: General Impression of two Western Tourists*, published in Central Tibetan Administration, Department of Information and International Relations, *Travellers to Tibet: A Selection of Eyewitness Accounts by Tibetans and Others (From 1959 to 2004)*, Dharamsala, 2004

\(^{13}\) Venerable (often shortened to Ven.) is a respectful title used for Tibetan monks and nuns.

The day after the protest, 2 October, the Dalai Lama’s older brother, Gyalo Thondup arrived in Beijing and delivered a copy of the Dalai Lama’s Five-Point Peace Plan for Tibet, despite China’s earlier rejection of the proposal. He also refuted Chinese criticism of the Dalai Lama, including Beijing’s claim that the Dalai Lama was responsible for initiating the protest in Lhasa.

Meanwhile, Chinese state media was quick to blame outside “hostile” forces, such as the “Dalai Clique”, the west and the exile Tibetan government, for the unrest. The protests were framed as violent, anti-China riots for Tibetan independence. The front page of Tibet Daily on 2 October contained an announcement from the Lhasa regional government to the residents. According to the official account of the previous day’s protest, “Tibetan ‘troublemakers’ had seized guns from the police and shot at Tibetans.” The announcement also laid out directives to Lhasa residents that were to mark the start of a new campaign against “splittism”. The directives urged loyalty to the Party, ordered neighbourhood committees to carry out ideological work and encouraged Tibetans to refrain from protests and inform on one another.

Later that evening, soldiers and security police surrounded Sera Monastery and swept through the compound, arresting any and all monks who were suspected of participating in the protests.

On 3 October the People’s Daily attacked the “Dalai Clique” in a commentary about the Lhasa protests saying, “It is a serious political incident instigated and engineered by the Dalai clique. Their purpose is to undermine the unification of the motherland and sabotage the unity and stability in Tibet in support of Dalai in his criminal activities abroad to split the motherland.” This was followed by the imposition of a 10pm curfew on Lhasa residents, which was announced on 4 October.

On 5 October political cadres appeared at Drepung Monastery and put up announcements condemning the demonstrations and protests. Meanwhile, police and work teams arrived at Ganden Monastery in an attempt to prevent monks from travelling into central Lhasa to protest.

16 Ibid., p. 44/45
Tsamla was a trader by occupation and a local resident of Lhasa, which was also her hometown. She took part in the protest on 1 October, 1987. She later also took part in the protest on 5 March 1988 as well as the protest on 10 December 1988. During our investigation we were told that Tsamla was shot in the neck during one of these protests. We have been unable to verify when this took place. We have also been unable to verify whether the first two photos are from 1987 or 1988.

After the December protest in 1988, Tsamla was detained at Gutsa Detention Centre. According to Amnesty International: “She was held incommunicado for at least the first six weeks of her detention, during which time she is said to have been repeatedly beaten and kicked while undergoing interrogation. Her condition worsened over her months in detention and, in May or June 1991, she was reportedly taken to a clinic near Gutsa and then to the Lhasa People's Hospital, where exploratory surgery was apparently performed, finding that she had suffered a ruptured spleen. While in hospital, she was apparently told that she had been released and should go home. She died at home about three months later, apparently as a result of the injuries she sustained in custody.”¹⁷ Tsamla was 39 years old when she died.

Karsel was a monk at Sera Monastery, who originally came from Meldrogongkar. He was shot and killed by armed forces during the protest in Lhasa on 1 October 1987. It is not known how old he was.

Ngawang Kunga was a monk from Drepung Monastery. His hometown is unknown. He participated in the protest on 1 October and was killed by gunshot during the protest. He was around 27 years old when he died.

6 October

Unlike the first two demonstrations, this protest took place in the afternoon at about 2:30pm. A group of around 50 monks from Drepung Monastery protested in front of the TAR government compound demanding the release of the 21 monks who had staged the first protest on 27 September. They shouted Tibetan independence slogans and marched towards the Jokhang Temple before turning round and going back to the TAR government compound. They did not carry flags. Their protest was broken up by 250 armed police who beat the monks with belts, sticks, rifles and pieces of metal while arresting them. The monks were unarmed and did not resist arrest. They were released two days later. However, around 600 Tibetans were arrested in the weeks following the protest and the Associated Press reported that the Chinese government had sent 1,000 armed policemen to Lhasa to help contain the situation.

In the days following the protest, the authorities made a concerted effort to contain the situation. Deputy Secretary Ragdi made a televised speech warning Tibetans not to protest, saying Tibetans who “dare to engage in further sabotage activities will be severely punished without any leniency.” Foreign journalists were ordered to leave Tibet within 48 hours. All other foreigners later received similar instructions but were given a little more time. Major monasteries were barred from accepting new monks. Senior Party officials, including Deputy Secretary Ragdi, visited Ganden Monastery in a further attempt to prevent monks from protesting and, on 15 October, around 60 people were arrested in the Barkhor area. From that point onward, Chinese police carried out regular patrols of the Barkhor and circumambulations around the Jokhang were banned.

On 16 October Beijing refused to permit a delegation of US lawmakers headed by Tom Lantos, co-chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, to visit Tibet as the group had proposed. Deng Xiaoping said in a dispatch released by Xinhua news agency, "The Dalai Lama and a few US Congressmen have created a little bit of trouble for us, but this will not affect our overall good situation. On the contrary, all this has revealed their ignorance and arrogance, and exposed their true nature."

The following day, 17 October, Yang Minfu, Director of the United Front Work Department, gave Gyal Thondup a five-point memorandum which stated that the Dalai Lama should bear the responsibility of the consequences of the incidents in Lhasa. He also reiterated there was no change in the central government’s policy towards the Dalai Lama. A few days later, on 24 October, armed police raided a number of private houses in Lhasa during the night and made numerous arrests.

**Additional protests**

On 6 November a protest occurred outside of Lhasa in Rebgong, an area which was traditionally part of Amdo but is currently part of China’s Qinghai Province. At the end of November, on the 27th, nine of the original 21 monks from Drepung Monastery were released after “confessing” to their crimes. There was another protest in Rebgong that same day.

On 19 December, a group of six nuns from Garu Nunnery, outside of Lhasa, staged a small demonstration around the Barkhor, shouting Tibetan independence slogans. They were arrested after completing several circuits of the Barkhor.
1988 Protests

In the 1980s, a new and more liberal religious policy had replaced the decades of religious persecution that followed the 1959 uprising. This led to one of the biggest religious festivals, the Monlam Prayer Festival, being revived in 1986. The Monlam being held in 1988 presented the authorities with a conundrum which was clearly described by Schwartz: “The potential for civil disorder, with many hundreds of monks assembled in the centre of Lhasa, was certainly not lost on the authorities. On the other hand, a successful Monlam would be proof that the situation in Lhasa was normal, that the authorities were in control, and that current policies were effective.”

Protest had actually been in abeyance since the crackdown of October 1987 but that was about to change. Collectively, the monks of Drepung, Sera and Ganden Monasteries decided to boycott the Monlam Prayer Festival. Once the authorities came to hear of this they started to pressure the monks in different ways, including official visits by senior leaders. The People’s Armed Police from Sichuan Province were deployed in the TAR for the first time. Also in January 1988, 59 people who had been arrested as a result of their involvement in the protests of the previous September and October were released (including Ngawang Woebar). While some attributed these releases to a personal intervention from the tenth Panchen Lama, the monks saw this as a cynical move by the authorities to “bribe” them. The regional Buddhist Association’s officials announced on 15 February 1988 at a press conference that the Monlam Prayer Festival would be held from 24 February till 5 March in the Jokhang Temple. There were no major incidents until the final day.

5 March

As one of the participants in the protest of 5 March, Ven. Bagdro from Ganden Monastery relayed to Tibet Watch:

“On 5 March 1988, on the last day of Choetrul Monlam Chenmo (The Great Prayer Festival), at around 8:30am, about 70 monks from Ganden Monastery staged a protest outside the Jokhang Temple. The monks shouted slogans: "Tibet is an independent country", "China out of Tibet", "Tibet belongs to Tibetans" and "Return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet".

The protest, which began with about 70 monks from Ganden Monastery, was later joined by many, while some ran away. As armed forces began beating the protesters, the protesters ran inside the Jokhang Temple where there was no army. The army then stormed inside the Jokhang Temple and threw monks around 10-11 years old from the terrace. Tear-gas, explosives and guns were used to control the protesters. A 13-year-old girl was shot in her heart and died in front of me. Another man named Gonpo Paljor from Kham was also shot dead.

A large number of armed forces and spies disguised as monks and in plain clothes were deployed in Lhasa. In a public toilet in Lhasa, I saw a Chinese spy in monks’ robes smoking, holding a walkie-talkie in one hand and a gun under the robe.

Sometime before 3 o’clock that afternoon I got up and went back to the demonstration where fighting was still going on. That afternoon, one of the Chinese soldiers was killed. Some say he was killed with stones, others say he was hit with a metal bar. I passed his dead body as I went around the building again shouting slogans. I was in a bad state, my right leg was swollen and my shoe was...”

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20 Testimony from Ven. Bagdro, interviewed by the Tibet Watch research team in Dharamsala, 17 February 2017
filled with blood from my heel which had been shot. My hands were bleeding, perhaps from throwing stones, and my head was wounded where the stone had hit me near the hairline.  

The protest continued till the next morning around 7am. Many were shot dead, many succumbed to their injuries in hospitals and many had sustained injuries from beatings. In the Chinese state run news, the authorities later lied that they didn’t shoot at protesters and that to disperse the crowd, guns were shot at the sky and on walls which hit back killing the protesters. 

As Schwartz explains, “It is impossible to determine exactly how many Tibetans died on 5 March. According to Tibetan witnesses, between eight and fifteen monks may have been beaten to death by PAP soldiers inside the Jokhang. After the beatings, four military trucks were loaded with monks from inside the Jokhang; many were dragged out unconscious, and some were believed to be dead. Some of the monks escaped by jumping from the building and were injured [...] some of the injured may have died in hiding, afraid to seek medical treatment for fear of arrest [...] there were rumours in the following days of teams of Chinese disposing of bodies. A wall poster circulated after 5 March stated that twelve monks had been gunned down inside the Palden Lhamo shrine inside the Jokhang.”

In the immediate weeks that followed the 5 March protest, hundreds of Tibetans were arrested at their homes. The detainees were sent to two facilities near Lhasa: Gutsa and Sanggyiib.

In his official annual statement of 10 March, the Dalai Lama appealed for international support and called on China to abandon its oppressive policies. China responded the following month, on 5 April, by calling on the Dalai Lama to publicly renounce the goal of independence. On 17 April, 13 nuns from Garu Nunnery staged another small protest in the Barkhor.

Ven. Bagdro managed to evade arrest for a few weeks but on 18 April he was arrested at his home after spending a night there. Ven. Bagdro, along with five others, were all charged with "manslaughter and counterrevolutionary activities" in connection with the death of a People's Armed Police Officer during the protest in Lhasa on 5 March 1988. Ven. Bagdro was sentenced to three years in prison. Lobsang Tenzin was given a death sentence which was commuted to life imprisonment and was later reduced to 18 years. Businessman Sonam Wangdu was given a life sentence but later released in 1993 on medical parole. Businessman Gyaltsen Choephel was sentenced to life but released in 1998 on medical parole. Student Tsering Dondrub was given a ten-year sentence and Ganden Monastery monk Tamdrin was given a five-year sentence.

A summer of resistance

Various acts of resistance continued over the following months. Nuns from Chupsang Nunnery staged a protest on 25 April, followed by nuns from Shugseb Nunnery on 17 May and nuns from Tsamkung Nunnery on 7 September. On 15 June the Dalai Lama announced a detailed framework for negotiations with Beijing in order to secure genuine autonomy for Tibet. Meanwhile, the monks of Drepung Monastery spent the summer working on the Drepung Manifesto, an 11-page pamphlet calling for democracy in Tibet.

On 16 September the US Senate unanimously passed a resolution commending the Dalai Lama for his efforts to resolve the problems of Tibet through negotiations, supporting his proposal to promote peace, protect the environment, and gain democracy for the people of Tibet, and calling on China to enter into discussions to resolve

22 Testimony from Ven. Bagdro, interviewed by the Tibet Watch research team in Dharamsala, 17 February 2017
23 People's Armed Police
the question of Tibet along the lines proposed by the Dalai Lama. On 21 September Beijing broke with their
traditional position and announced that they welcomed negotiations with the Dalai Lama, stating: “The venue of
the talks can be Beijing, Hong Kong, or any of the Chinese embassies and consulates abroad. Should the Dalai
Lama find these places inconvenient, he can choose any place at his discretion provided that no foreigners
participate in the talks.” Tibetan representatives accepted the invitation and proposed that talks be held in

10 December

On 27 September – the first anniversary of the original 1987 protest – nine monks from Drepung Monastery
staged a protest in the Barkhor. This one passed peacefully enough. However, on 10 December a far larger
protest erupted in Lhasa. This date, International Human Rights Day, was officially acknowledged by China for the
first time in 1988 and widely publicised. This helped alert Tibetans to the significance of the date and, in turn, led
to this being the most well-planned demonstration, with coordination between the three main monasteries,
several of the nunneries and a network of lay residents in Lhasa.25

Police opened fire on protesters, including foreigners, and a Dutch tourist was shot in the shoulder. The following
day China announced that Wu Jinghua would be replaced as Party Secretary in the TAR by Hu Jintao.

Lobsang Gelek was a monk at Sera Monastery at the time of the protest. He was born in Lhatse. He participated in the 1988 protests and was wounded by gunshot. He recovered but was later arrested. He was 22 years old at the time these photos were taken.

The sign he is holding up says: Sera Monastery monk Lobsang Gelek, age 22, born in Lhatse.

The photo to the left shows Lobsang Gelek’s blood stained clothes after the protest. The white circles mark the bullet holes.

The photo below shows Dutch national Christa Meindersma, who was shot during the protest in Lhasa on 10 December 1988. Tibet Watch contacted her to obtain her own account of the events of that day:

This is me, just after the shooting, 10 December 1988. We are walking away from the Barkhor towards the main road where the Yak hotel and Banakshol were located. It was just after being shot on the Barkhor. We, me, Camilla Coronoa, Ron Schwartz, two other foreigners, were watching a small demonstration from the Barkhor.

The demonstrators had reached in front of the Jokhang. Suddenly, we saw special forces run into the Barkhor. We never expected them to shoot but started to run away anyway. They opened fire indiscriminately without warning.

I felt something hot in my arm, then heard the sound of gunfire. I first thought these were firecrackers and that this is why they tell children not to play with firecrackers. Then I realised I had been shot. I wanted to faint but a voice in my head told me to run back into the Barkhor. I ran back and wanted to seek refuge behind a turned over market table. There were too many Tibetans already behind that table. I sat in front of the table, to be out of the line of fire.

A man sat next to me, he had been shot in the leg. We looked back and saw the soldiers who continued shooting, coming close. We both realised we would die if we stayed there. We looked at each other and said: ta dro, let’s run. We both ran. The man fell. I did not stop but continued to run with eight soldiers running after me shooting at me. I wanted to faint but kept on telling myself that my legs were ok and I had to keep on running. Bullets were skimming past my ears. I turned the corner, ran into the first door that was opened, into a courtyard.

There were lots of Tibetans crying, many wounded. Again, I wanted to faint. I said to the woman next to me that I had been shot and could she help me. She took me into her house. I met her ten years later. She told me she had taken me into her house and thought I would die. She did not have any medicine so she and a friend decided to cut a precious pill in half. One half they made into a paste and rubbed in my wounds. The other half they burned as a kind of incense under my nose. They wanted me to die peacefully. I remember I could not stop screaming with pain. I remember being embarrassed that I was making such a noise but the pain was too fierce. After a while the women decided that I was not going to die as I did not calm down and that I should be taken to the hospital. Some foreigners helped me walk until we got a car to go to the hospital.

You can see the blood stains on my jacket and trousers. The bullet had traversed my left arm and shoulder and had exited at my back. I did not know this at the time but just felt two places of intense pain, my arm and my back. After eight hours in the hospital I was kept under house arrest for one week. My passport was confiscated and me and my friends were interrogated. I received my first treatment in the military hospital in Hong Kong, one week later, on 16 December. When the doctor had examined me he said: "I have seen thousands of bullet wounds but never one like this. You should have been dead."  

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Testimony from Christa Meindersma via email correspondence with Tibet Watch on 20 February 2017. After leaving Tibet, Christa went on to various roles at the United Nations, including coordinating the UNHCR’s Tibetan refugee program in Nepal.
1989 Protests

In January 1989 China backed out of the proposed talks with the Dalai Lama. Instead, Hu Jintao arrived in Lhasa to replace Wu Jinghua as Party Secretary and trials were held for Tibetans who had been arrested during the period since the unrest started in 1987. At least 27 Tibetans were charged and sentenced at that time, with many receiving long sentences. Some of them had already been held for more than a year. The sentences handed down extended up to life imprisonment and even the death penalty.

The tenth Panchen Lama also arrived in Tibet. In a well-known speech given to Party officials in Shigatse on 23 January, the Panchen Lama said, “although there had been development in Tibet since its liberation, this development had cost more dearly than its achievements. This mistake must never be repeated.”

The Panchen Lama died on 28 January and rumours quickly circulated in Lhasa that he had been murdered. Throughout the winter, posters had been going up in Lhasa supporting the monks and nuns who had protested and calling for more protests. In February 1989, nuns and monks carried out several small demonstrations in Lhasa, including one on 22 February where nuns and lay people demonstrated around the Jokhang Temple calling for Tibet’s independence. However, it was only in early March 1989 that larger scale unrest broke out.

5-7 March

Initially, there were small protests in the Barkhor on 1, 2 and 4 March. The authorities did not really respond to these. The protest of 5 March also started small – with six nuns, three monks and a few Tibetan youths in the Barkhor. It quickly gathered pace as they circled and called for freedom and Tibetan independence. Once the crowd and onlookers had increased in number, they approached a police station from which a policeman threw a bottle. One Tibetan youth responded by throwing a rock which hit the wall. Plain clothes police officers and uniformed soldiers appeared in the area and began firing shots, escalating the situation but dispersing the crowd. An estimated 50 Tibetans were killed that day, with many more wounded.

For the next two days, protests continued with an increasingly harsh response from the security forces. On 6 March, Chinese civilians were attacked by Tibetan protesters and Chinese properties were vandalised. Again the police fired upon the protesters and more people died. On the evening of 7 March a contingent of 2,000 troops from the People’s Armed Police and People’s Liberation Army arrived to quell the protests. It is estimated that between 80 and 150 people were dead by the end of that three day period.

Ngawang Woebart, having been released from prison in 1988, continued to be actively involved in Lhasa:

“I was helping those injured protesters from the 1989 protests as the protests continued for three days from 5 - 7 March and martial law was later in Lhasa. I personally witnessed an old man being beaten to death by soldiers.

In April 1990, a huge number of monks from Sera, Drepung, and Ganden and from other monasteries were expelled from their respective monasteries and forbidden to join other monasteries. 57 monks were expelled from Drepung Monastery alone during that time, including myself.

Those expelled monks were brought back to their home and handed over to the local police. Everyone was warned that they were neither allowed to join other monasteries nor permitted to leave the place. More than three people were not allowed to assemble and permission would need to be

sought from the local police station to visit outside areas for more than three days. A written report would have to be submitted every week to the police station about daily activities.

In April 1991, Chinese authorities had started arresting the monks who had participated in earlier protests and they were given a range of sentences such as 19 years imprisonment, 18 years, 16 years, 15 years, etc. Therefore, along with a few others, I fled Tibet.\(^{28}\)

On 7 March, martial law was officially declared in Lhasa. By 9 March it was reported that around 1,000 Tibetans had been imprisoned and all foreigners had been expelled from Tibet.

Ngawang Dubchok

Ngawang Dubchok, also known as Anu, was a monk from Drepung Monastery at the time of the protests. His hometown was Phenpo, near Lhasa. He participated in the protests which took place 5-7 March and suffered gunshot wounds as a result. The photos were taken at Lhasa People’s Hospital in March 1989. It is believed that Ngawang Dubchok is still alive. He was in his early 20s at the time of the protest.

\(^{28}\) Testimony from Ngawang Woebar, interviewed by the Tibet Watch research team in Dharamsala, 2017.
Kalsang Tsering was killed during the protests of 1989. According to eyewitnesses, pictures of many others who were shot dead and also many who died later as a result of their injuries have not made it into exile.

Lobsang Tenpa was a monk at Sera Monastery who came from Toelung County. He participated in the 5-7 March protests, where he was injured. He received medical treatment at Men-Tsee-Khang. His age at the time is unknown but he is said to still be alive.
Kalsang Tsering was a monk from Sera Monastery at the time of the protests. He was around 25 years old. His hometown is Phenpo, near Lhasa.

Kalsang Tsering participated in the 5-7 March protests. He suffered multiple gunshot wounds and died after two weeks in Lhasa People's Hospital. It was said that all his organs had failed. Many people came to donate blood to him, as well as to Ngawang Dubchok and another protester named Wangdue.
These two photos, above, show blood stained garments belonging to Wangdue – a 23-year-old monk from Ganden Monastery – and other protesters. The white circles mark where the bullets passed through. The injuries were sustained during the 5-7 March protests in 1989 when armed forces opened fire on the protesters.

Phurbu Tsering was a local resident of Lhasa. He was hit with an iron rod by armed security forces during the protest on 5 March. He initially survived but died of his injuries in 1996.
Tashi Tsering

Tashi Tsering’s hometown was Ngamring. He was arrested and jailed for putting up posters in Lhasa in 1989. He was tortured in prison and died on 17 January 1995.

These photos, above, show an unknown layman who participated in the protests 5-7 March. He was injured during the protest and treated at Men-Tsee-Khang, Lhasa.

The photos above show Tibetans carrying the dead bodies of protesters for cremation.
International Response to the Protests

Media

With dramatic photographs being smuggled out of Lhasa, the protests made the news around the world. The examples below are a small sample that has been collected from online archives.

Glasgow Herald
Monday October 5 1987
World News
Lhasa, Sunday

Soldiers and police tightened their grip on the Tibetan capital Lhasa today, blocking roads and sealing off monasteries after as many as 19 people were reported to have been killed in last week’s rioting against Chinese rule...

The New York Times
World
October 12, 1987

Lhasa, Tibet, Oct. 9
Over the last three weeks, Lhasa has been shaken by three demonstrations against Chinese rule, protests led by shaven-headed monks from monasteries hammered into the mountains edging the north of the city...
Chicago Tribune  
Sunday, October 4, 1987  
Nation/world  

Chengdu, China – China issued a harsh attack on the Dalai Lama Saturday, two days after a crowd of Tibetans stoned and burned a police station during a pro-independence rally in Lhasa, Tibet, in which six people were reported killed...

The New York Times  
World  
May 8, 1988  

At least 18 Buddhist monks, including a 12-year-old boy, were killed during nationalist protests in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in early March, according to a new report from a foreigner who went to Tibet after the violence...

The New York Times  
World  
August 14, 1990  

London, Aug 13 – A former Chinese journalist says security forces killed more than 450 Tibetans in the capital of Lhasa in 1989, the Observer newspaper has reported...
Free Tibet and the birth of a movement

In addition to international media coverage, the events of the late 1980s in Lhasa kick-started a wave of civil society support and a number of new Tibet groups, commonly known as Tibet Support Groups, were created. One of the first of these was Tibet Watch’s partner, Free Tibet, which started to form in 1987, a few weeks after the first protest. Some of the others which were created around the same time include the Canada Tibet Committee in 1987, the International Campaign for Tibet and the Australia Tibet Council in 1988, and Tibet Initiative Deutschland in 1989. They were soon followed by others and today there are over 200 different Tibet Support Groups and other Tibetan organisations in over 50 countries around the world.

Originally, Free Tibet was known as Tibet Support Group UK. The group renamed itself in 1996, changing to Free Tibet Campaign. In 2008 the name was shortened to Free Tibet. In a recent interview, Sue Byrne – one of the founders of both Free Tibet and Tibet Watch – shared her recollections of Free Tibet’s origins.

“I became involved with Tibet in the early 80s; meeting the Dalai Lama and hearing him speak. I then volunteered to work with Tibet Foundation, a London-based charity set up by Tibetans.

When news bulletins about the uprising in Lhasa in autumn 1987 were broadcast, it was probably the first time Tibet had come into public consciousness for many decades. It was as though the Tibet issue burst onto the world when the disturbances were picked up by news services around the world.

The previous time Tibet had broken into Western consciousness was in 1959 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama escaped, with newspapers such as the Daily Mail carrying sensational stories about a mystical Lama who had arrived in Eastern India. British journalists working in China at ITN and the BBC, among others, were eager for information and this came out of Tibet through the actions of a collection of travellers who were in Lhasa witnessing the events - they gathered in a hotel in Lhasa and were determined, one way or another, to send news to the outside world about what was happening. This group included John Ackerly, Blake Kerr, Nicholas Howen and Robbie Barnett.

Not long after this, I met the Dalai Lama at a Heathrow airport hotel as he was passing through London. I was introduced to him and, as he grasped my hand, he said something like “please continue, please continue”. I had my instructions, so to speak.

In the aftermath of the September uprising there were continuing disturbances in Tibet, with monks bringing out information. Nicholas Howen stayed in Tibet for some time working with Tibetans taking great risks to try and feed out information.

Some of the key people involved in our emerging group were close to the Dalai Lama and we all felt like we had to do something to draw the world’s attention to the continuing oppression in Tibet. At some stage after the 1987 protests there was a public meeting, called by Lord Avebury, a Liberal Democrat peer, to discuss the situation in Tibet and, more importantly, decide what we could do. At that meeting I suggested starting a kind of membership organisation to put pressure on our government. From that meeting a core group of about twelve to fifteen people emerged who were determined to do something concrete and effective. We began to meet regularly. Sean Jones, a devotee of the Dalai Lama, owned Reho, a travel company, and offered his office for these initial meetings as we explored the idea of a pressure group for Tibet. We had no money and at the end of each meeting literally put money into a hat in the centre of the room!

29 Robbie Barnett went on to become one of the founders of Tibet Support Group UK. Together, he and Nicholas Howen also established the Tibet Information Network, which produced ground-breaking research on Tibet for around two decades. He has since become Professor of Tibetan Studies at Columbia University in New York. Nicholas Howen, a qualified lawyer, joined Amnesty International and later the United Nations, before becoming Secretary General of the International Commission of Jurists. He died of cancer in 2010. John Ackerly went on to become President of the International Campaign for Tibet and remains on their board. Blake Kerr, a medical doctor, spent years documenting torture of Tibetan political prisoners and China’s national policy of coerced abortions, sterilisation and infanticide in Tibet.
In April 1988, coinciding with a visit to London by the Dalai Lama, there was an event at the Japanese Peace Pagoda in Battersea Park. The government had given the Dalai Lama a visa on the condition “he did not speak about the political situation of Tibet”. This spurred on the other speakers to do just that - speak out for Tibet - and all called for action. Among those who addressed the crowd were Lord Ennals, a great defender of human rights and deeply committed to Tibet; Stephen Corry, the director of Survival International - a pressure group for tribal people; and Riga Wangyal of the Tibetan Women’s Association.

We began to learn the importance of collating accurate, up-to-date and corroborated information from Tibet so we could begin to have substantive dialogue with the press, politicians, governments and other international bodies. We continued to have our meetings and, at that time, there was an embryonic movement that had begun across Europe as well as the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, of people getting together to support Tibet. Very often they were people whose connection with Tibet came through Buddhism. His Holiness, on one occasion, said in the course of a speech: "Now is the time when action is practice". Up to then, some people who were following Tibetan Buddhism did not want to get involved in, what they thought was, political action. However, when His Holiness said “Now is the time to stand up” it definitely encouraged many more to become involved in our putative campaign.

As 1988 drew on we became clearer about what we wanted to do; we wanted to grow grassroots support for Tibet and Tibetans. We came to believe that only by raising and maintaining awareness of the situation in Tibet and the abuse of human rights would public opinion change and people would act to support Tibet when appropriate occasions arose. This change would, in turn, put pressure on our government and other agencies to press the case for Tibet and Tibetans with China. We believed the campaign was a fundamental case of justice for a people under occupation who had the right to determine their own future and be rid of their occupiers.

We came to realise we were in it for the long haul so we wanted to build an organisation that would last and not fizzle out as earlier initiatives had. Stephen Corry, who later became our Chair, and Lucy Cawthron, among others, really instilled in us the importance of management, administration and sound finances in creating a sustainable campaign. We decided we wanted a paid Director, instead of relying on a volunteer who would not be able to offer continuity and a permanent presence. ... This is how we started.”

The photo on the left, taken in 1989, is of Sue Byrne and Dr Tsering Shakya, two of the founders of Tibet Support Group UK.

From humble beginnings and a single, part-time member of staff, Free Tibet has gone from strength to strength and remained at the forefront of the Tibet movement. Today, Free Tibet is based at an office in London and has nine members of staff, although some are still part time. It remains committed to a vision of a free Tibet in which Tibetans are able to determine their own future and the human rights of all are respected.

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30 Testimony from Sue Byrne, interviewed by Free Tibet in London, 18 September 2017.
31 Sue Byrne remains on the Free Tibet Executive Committee and the Tibet Watch Board of Trustees. Dr Tsering Shakya is now Canada Research Chair on Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia at the University of British Columbia.
Conclusion

“At present in Asia, as elsewhere, tensions are high. There are open conflicts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and in my own country, Tibet. To a large extent, these problems are symptoms of the underlying tensions that exist among the area’s great powers.”

These words were spoken by the Dalai Lama during his address to the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus on 21 September 1987. In more recent years that date, 21 September, has come to be recognised as the United Nations’ International Day of Peace.

The words themselves describe a situation 30 years in the past and yet they describe the region today just as accurately. In some ways, very little has changed in the past three decades. In some respects, that is an incredibly sad realisation. In others, it is an incredible achievement.

China has grown considerably in power and influence. Many governments follow a policy of appeasement; overwhelmed by China’s rhetoric and propaganda, they treat China as the dominant state it so desperately wants to be and eagerly sacrifice their human rights concerns for trade deals. Meanwhile, Tibet remains all but sealed off from the world both physically and digitally, with Lhasa subject to the most stringent surveillance and control. All signs of dissent are quickly and brutally crushed.

Despite this, Tibetans continue to resist and the international Tibet movement has grown in strength and reach. It is increasingly difficult to get information out of Tibet and yet groups like Tibet Watch continue to do so – primarily because brave Tibetans inside Tibet remain committed to the freedom struggle and are willing to risk their own freedom and safety to ensure that news continues to reach the outside world. It is increasingly difficult to get Tibet the attention it deserves, whether in the media or in political forums. The advent of the internet and social media means that people are used to having instant information about everything happening everywhere. They don’t understand how slow and difficult and dangerous it is to get information about protests and other human rights incidents happening in Tibet. They are used to having things streamed online as they happen and don’t appreciate the value of the few, often blurred, photographs that Tibet Watch manages to acquire. At the same time, some people are overwhelmed by all the information they have access to and the news from Tibet must compete with war and terrorism and humanitarian crises around the world. Yet, despite all these challenges, groups like Tibet Watch—and Free Tibet—continue to have an impact, continue to press governments for their support, continue to build civil support and ensure that Tibet’s story is passed on to each new generation.

In 1987 the Dalai Lama proposed a peace plan for Tibet which was flatly rejected by China. This was by no means the sole cause of the protests which followed but was undoubtedly a factor. On 10 December 1989 the international community recognised what China would not and the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, “first and foremost for his consistent resistance to the use of violence in his people's struggle to regain their liberty.” China’s bullish opposition to the peace proposal may even have played a part in the Nobel Committee’s decision. In a similar way, their brutal response to the peaceful protests of 1987-89 definitely influenced the international response. The protests may have been crushed but they have an enduring legacy in the strength of the international Tibet movement that they inspired. That inspiration remains at the heart of everything we do and will keep us going until the day Tibet is free.

Appendices

The Dalai Lama’s Address to the US Congressional Human Rights Caucus
21 September 1987

The world is increasingly interdependent, so that lasting peace - national, regional and global - can only be achieved if we think in terms of broader interest rather than parochial needs. At this time, it is crucial that all of us, the strong and the weak, contribute in our own way. I speak to you today as the leader of the Tibetan people and as a Buddhist monk devoted to the principles of a religion based on love and compassion. Above all, I am here as a human being who is destined to share this planet with you and all others as brothers and sisters. As the world grows smaller, we need each other more than in the past. This is true in all parts of the world, including the continent I come from.

At present in Asia, as elsewhere, tensions are high. There are open conflicts in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and in my own country, Tibet. To a large extent, these problems are symptoms of the underlying tensions that exist among the area's great powers. In order to resolve regional conflicts, an approach is required that takes into account the interests of all relevant countries and peoples, large and small. Unless comprehensive solutions are formulated that take into account the aspirations of the people most directly concerned, piecemeal or merely expedient measures will only create new problems.

The Tibetan people are eager to contribute to regional and world peace, and I believe they are in a unique position to do so. Traditionally, Tibetans are a peace loving and non-violent people. Since Buddhism was introduced to Tibet over one thousand years ago, Tibetans have practiced non-violence with respect to all forms of life. This attitude has also been extended to our country's international relations. Tibet's highly strategic position in the heart of Asia, separating the continent's great powers - India, China and the USSR - has throughout history endowed it with an essential role in the maintenance of peace and stability. This is precisely why, in the past, Asia's empires went to great lengths to keep one another out of Tibet. Tibet's value as an independent buffer state was integral to the region's stability.

When the newly formed People's Republic of China invaded Tibet in 1949/50, it created a new source of conflict. This was highlighted when, following the Tibetan national uprising against the Chinese and my flight to India in 1959, tensions between China and India escalated into the border war in 1962. Today large numbers of troops are again massed on both sides of the Himalayan border and tension is once more dangerously high.

The real issue, of course, is not the Indo-Tibetan border demarcation. It is China's illegal occupation of Tibet, which has given it direct access to the Indian sub-continent. The Chinese authorities have attempted to confuse the issue by claiming that Tibet has always been a part of China. This is untrue. Tibet was a fully independent state when the People's Liberation Army invaded the country in 1949/50.

Since Tibetan emperors unified Tibet, over a thousand years ago, our country was able to maintain its independence until the middle of this century. At times Tibet extended its influence over neighbouring countries and peoples and, in other periods, came itself under the influence of powerful foreign rulers - the Mongol Khans, the Gorkhas of Nepal, the Manchu Emperors and the British in India.

It is, of course, not uncommon for states to be subjected to foreign influence or interference. Although so-called satellite relationships are perhaps the clearest examples of this, most major powers exert influence over less powerful allies or neighbours. As the most authoritative legal studies have shown, in Tibet's case, the country's occasional subjection to foreign influence never entailed a loss of independence. And there can be no doubt that when Peking's communist armies entered Tibet, Tibet was in all respects an independent state.

China's aggression, condemned by virtually all nations of the free world, was a flagrant violation of international law. As China's military occupation of Tibet continues, the world should remember that though Tibetans have lost their freedom, under international law Tibet today is still an independent state under illegal occupation.
It is not my purpose to enter into a political/legal discussion here concerning Tibet's status. I just wish to emphasise the obvious and undisputed fact that we Tibetans are a distinct people with our own culture, language, religion and history. But for China's occupation, Tibet would still, today, fulfil its natural role as a buffer state maintaining and promoting peace in Asia.

It is my sincere desire, as well as that of the Tibetan people, to restore to Tibet her invaluable role, by converting the entire country - comprising the three provinces of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo - once more into a place of stability, peace and harmony. In the best of Buddhist tradition, Tibet would extend its services and hospitality to all who further the cause of world peace and the well-being of mankind and the natural environment we share.

Despite the holocaust inflicted upon our people in the past decades of occupation, I have always strived to find a solution through direct and honest discussions with the Chinese. In 1982, following the change of leadership in China and the establishment of direct contacts with the government in Peking, I sent my representatives to Peking to open talks concerning the future of my country and people.

We entered the dialogue with the sincere and positive attitude and with the willingness to take into account the legitimate needs of the People's Republic of China. I hoped that this attitude would be reciprocated and that a solution could eventually be found which would satisfy and safeguard the aspirations and interests of both parties. Unfortunately, China has consistently responded to our efforts in a defensive manner, as though our detailing of Tibet's very real difficulties was criticism for its own sake.

To our even greater dismay, the Chinese government misused the opportunity for a genuine dialogue. Instead of addressing the real issues facing the six million Tibetan people, China has attempted to reduce the question of Tibet to a discussion of my own personal status.

It is against this background and in response to the tremendous support and encouragement I have been given by you and other persons I have met during this trip, that I wish today to clarify the principal issues and to propose, in a spirit of openness and conciliation, a first step towards a lasting solution. I hope this may contribute to a future of friendship and cooperation with all of our neighbours, including the Chinese people.

This peace plan contains five basic components:
1. Transformation of the whole of Tibet into a zone of peace;
2. Abandonment of China's population transfer policy which threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a people;
3. Respect for the Tibetan people's fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms;
4. Restoration and protection of Tibet's natural environment and the abandonment of China's use of Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and dumping of nuclear waste;
5. Commencement of earnest negotiations on the future status of Tibet and of relations between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples.

Let me explain these five components.

1. I propose that the whole of Tibet, including the eastern provinces of Kham and Amdo, be transformed into a zone of "Ahimsa", a Hindi term used to mean a state of peace and non-violence.

The establishment of such a peace zone would be in keeping with Tibet's historical role as a peaceful and neutral Buddhist nation and buffer state separating the continent's great powers. It would also be in keeping with Nepal's proposal to proclaim Nepal a peace zone and with China's declared support for such a proclamation. The peace zone proposed by Nepal would have a much greater impact if it were to include Tibet and neighbouring areas.

The establishment of a peace zone in Tibet would require withdrawal of Chinese troops and military installations from the country, which would enable India also to withdraw troops and military installations from the Himalayan
regions bordering Tibet. This would be achieved under an international agreement which would satisfy China's legitimate security needs and build trust among the Tibetan, Indian, Chinese and other peoples of the region. This is in everyone's best interest, particularly that of China and India, as it would enhance their security, while reducing the economic burden of maintaining high troop concentrations on the disputed Himalayan border.

Historically, relations between China and India were never strained. It was only when Chinese armies marched into Tibet, creating for the first time a common border, that tensions arose between these two powers, ultimately leading to the 1962 war. Since then numerous dangerous incidents have continued to occur. A restoration of good relations between the world’s two most populous countries would be greatly facilitated if they were separated - as they were throughout history - by a large and friendly buffer region.

To improve relations between the Tibetan people and the Chinese, the first requirement is the creation of trust. After the holocaust of the last decades in which over one million Tibetans - one sixth of the population - lost their lives and at least as many lingered in prison camps because of their religious beliefs and love of freedom, only a withdrawal of Chinese troops could start a genuine process of reconciliation. The vast occupation force in Tibet is a daily reminder to the Tibetans of the oppression and suffering they have all experienced. A troop withdrawal would be an essential signal that in future a meaningful relationship might be established with the Chinese, based on friendship and trust.

2. The population transfer of Chinese into Tibet, which the government in Peking pursues in order to force a "final solution" to the Tibetan problem by reducing the Tibetan population to an insignificant and disenfranchised minority in Tibet itself, must be stopped.

The massive transfer of Chinese civilians into Tibet in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949) threatens the very existence of the Tibetans as a distinct people. In the eastern parts of our country, the Chinese now greatly outnumber Tibetans. In the Amdo province, for example, where I was born, there are, according to the Chinese statistics, 2.5 million Chinese and only 750,000 Tibetans. Even in the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region (i.e., central and western Tibet), Chinese government sources now confirm that Chinese outnumber Tibetans.

The Chinese population transfer policy is not new. It has been systematically applied to other areas before. Earlier in this century, the Manchus were a distinct race with their own culture and traditions. Today only two to three million Manchurians are left in Manchuria, where 75 million Chinese have settled. In Eastern Turkestan, which the Chinese now call Sinkiang, the Chinese population has grown from 200,000 in 1949 to 7 million, more than half of the total population of 13 million. In the wake of the Chinese colonisation of Inner Mongolia, Chinese number 8.5 million, Mongols 2.5 million.

Today, in the whole of Tibet 7.5 million Chinese settlers have already been sent, outnumbering the Tibetan population of 6 million. In central and western Tibet, now referred to by the Chinese as the "Tibet Autonomous Region", Chinese sources admit the 1.9 million Tibetans already constitute a minority of the region's population. These numbers do not take the estimated 300,000-500,000 troops in Tibet into account - 250,000 of them in so-called Tibet Autonomous Region.

For the Tibetans to survive as a people, it is imperative that the population transfer is stopped and Chinese settlers return to China. Otherwise, Tibetans will soon be no more than a tourist attraction and relic of a noble past.

3. Fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms must be respected in Tibet. The Tibetan people must once again be free to develop culturally, intellectually, economically and spiritually and to exercise basic democratic freedoms.

Human rights violations in Tibet are among the most serious in the world. Discrimination is practiced in Tibet under a policy of "apartheid" which the Chinese call "segregation and assimilation". Tibetans are, at best, second class citizens in their own country. Deprived of all basic democratic rights and freedoms, they exist under a colonial administration in which all real power is wielded by Chinese officials of the Communist Party and the army.
Although the Chinese government allows Tibetans to rebuild some Buddhist monasteries and to worship in them, it still forbids serious study and teaching of religion. Only a small number of people, approved by the Communist Party, are permitted to join the monasteries.

While Tibetans in exile exercise their democratic rights under a constitution promulgated by me in 1963, thousands of our countrymen suffer in prisons and labour camps in Tibet for their religious or political convictions.

4. Serious efforts must be made to restore the natural environment in Tibet. Tibet should not be used for the production of nuclear weapons and the dumping of nuclear waste.

Tibetans have a great respect for all forms of life. This inherent feeling is enhanced by the Buddhist faith, which prohibits the harming of all sentient beings, whether human or animal. Prior to the Chinese invasion, Tibet was an unspoiled wilderness sanctuary in a unique natural environment. Sadly, in the past decades the wildlife and the forests of Tibet have been almost totally destroyed by the Chinese. The effects on Tibet's delicate environment have been devastating. What little is left in Tibet must be protected and efforts must be made to restore the environment to its balanced state.

China uses Tibet for the production of nuclear weapons and may also have started dumping nuclear waste in Tibet. Not only does China plan to dispose of its own nuclear waste but also that of other countries, who have already agreed to pay Peking to dispose of their toxic materials.

The dangers this presents are obvious. Not only living generations, but future generations are threatened by China's lack of concern for Tibet's unique and delicate environment.

5. Negotiations on the future status of Tibet and the relationship between the Tibetan and Chinese peoples should be started in earnest.

We wish to approach this subject in a reasonable and realistic way, in a spirit of frankness and conciliation and with a view to finding a solution that is in the long term interest of all: the Tibetans, the Chinese, and all other peoples concerned. Tibetans and Chinese are distinct peoples, each with their own country, history, culture, language, and way of life. Differences among peoples must be recognised and respected. They need not, however, form obstacles to genuine cooperation where this is in the mutual benefit of both peoples. It is my sincere belief that if the concerned parties were to meet and discuss their future with an open mind and a sincere desire to find a satisfactory and just solution, a breakthrough could be achieved. We must all exert ourselves to be reasonable and wise, and to meet in a spirit of frankness and understanding.

Let me end on the personal note. I wish to thank you for the concern and support which you and so many of your colleagues and fellow citizens have expressed for the plight of oppressed people everywhere. The fact that you have publicly shown your sympathy for us Tibetans has already had a positive impact on the lives of our people inside Tibet. I ask for your continued support in this critical time in our country's history.

Thank you.

Martial Law Decree of the People's Govt. of the Tibet Autonomous Region (1989)

MARTIAL LAW DECREES ISSUED BY DORJIE CEIRING, CHAIRMAN OF THE PEOPLE'S GOVERNMENT OF THE TIBET AUTONOMOUS REGION


In accordance with the martial law issued by the State Council, the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region has issued the following orders:

1. Starting from zero hour of March 9, 1989, a martial law will be enforced in Lhasa city proper and in the area west of Lhamo Township, Dazi County and east of Dongga Township, Duilong Deqing County.

2. During the time of the enforcement of the martial law, assemblies, demonstrations, strikes by workers, students and other people, petitions, and other get-togethers are strictly forbidden.

3. Traffic control measures will be implemented in the martial-law-enforced-area. People and vehicles entering and going out of the area must go through formalities according to the regulations and receive security inspections.

4. Without permissions, foreigners are not allowed to enter the martial-law-enforced-area. Foreigners who are now in the martial-law-enforced-area must leave within a definite time, except those who have permissions.

5. Firearms and ammunition possessed illegally should be taken over. People who are not entrusted with the task of enforcing the martial law are not allowed to carry firearms, ammunition, and other dangerous articles.

6. Public security organs and people entrusted with the task of enforcing the martial law have the right to search the riot-creating suspects and places where criminals are possibly hidden.

7. Those who resist to carry out the martial law and instigate others to do the same will be severely punished according to the law.


In order to safeguard the unity of the motherland, ensure the safety of citizens and personal property and protect public property from violation, the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region specially issues the following orders:

1. It absolutely bans anyone, in any case and in any form, to instigate split of the country, create riots, group people to attack government offices, damage public property, [or] undertake such sabotaging actions as lighting, smashing, robbing, and arson.

2. Once the above-mentioned action happens, public security and police force and the PLA men on patrol have the right to take necessary and strong measures to put the action down at once. Those who make above-mentioned action will be detained right on the spot, and if resistance occurs, police and armymen on duty can deal with them according to the law.

3. Any government institutions, units, mass organisations, and citizens must immediately send criminals either found in operation or detected afterwards to judicial organs.

4. The judicial organs should make investigations of the crimes as soon as possible, handle cases without delay and give them heavy punishment in accordance with relevant decisions and articles of The Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Heavy Punishment to Criminals Who Seriously Violate Public Security and Criminal Law.

In accordance with the martial law of the State Council, the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region has decided that traffic control will be enforced during the time of martial law. It specially issues the following orders:

1. All kinds of motor-driven vehicles cannot pass without the special permit or provisional passes issued by the traffic police brigade of the Lhasa Public Security Bureau. The persons who have the provisional pass must go through the designated way and within the fixed time.

2. Cadres and staff members must have identity cards or certificates issued by their units; the officials and soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army and the police force must have armymen’s permits; the officials and soldiers of the public security departments must have employees’ cards or the identity cards on patrol duty; students in schools must have their students’ identity cards or schools’ certificates; monks and nuns must have the certificates issued by the democratic management committees of their monasteries; the preschool children should move about with adults.

3. All kinds of motor-driven vehicles on entering the martial-law-enforced-area must show certificates issued by the people’s government of county level or above, and apply for provisional passes; persons from out of Lhasa on entering the martial-law-enforced-area must have certificates issued by the people’s government of county level or above and must go through formalities for temporary residence within five hours after entering the area; cadres, workers, and staff members of the Tibet Autonomous Region back from holidays and official business can enter the area with certificates which establish their identities.

4. Motor-driven vehicles and persons leaving the martial-law-enforced-area must be approved by leaders of county level or above and have their unit’s certificates.

5. Motor-driven vehicles and persons passing within the martial-law-enforced-area or entering and going out of the area must receive security inspection by police and armymen.

6. If any persons violate the above-mentioned orders, the people on patrol duty have the right to examine them according to the different cases, adopt mandatory measures on the spot and even look into responsibility for a crime.

Order No. 4 of the People’s Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region, March 8, 1989.

In order to ensure the security of aliens in the martial-law-enforced-area, the People’s Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region issues the following orders:

1. During the time of the enforcement of the martial law in Lhasa City, aliens cannot enter the area without permission. Aliens now in Lhasa must observe martial law issued by the State Council of the People’s Republic of China and Orders of the People’s Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region.

2. Foreign guests to Lhasa invited by the People’s Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region and by other government organs must show the Pass of the People’s Republic of China (which is called "Pass" for short below) issued by the Foreign Affairs Office of the People’s Government of the Region when entering and going out of the area.

3. Foreign specialists and foreign staff members of joint ventures working in Lhasa must show "Pass" issued by public security authorities when entering and going out of the area.

4. Aliens who have obtained the right of residence in Lhasa must show valid residence identity cards when entering and going out of the area.

5. Foreign tourist groups organised by tourist agencies now staying in the Region can enter and go out of the area, only if they are accompanied by Chinese guides with "Pass" issued by the public security authorities.

6. Unorganised foreign tourists now staying in Lhasa must leave in the time fixed by the public security authorities. The "Pass" will be obtained at the Foreign Section of the Lhasa Public Security Bureau with "Residence Identity Card for Alien" issued by the public security authorities.
Order No. 5 of the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region, March 8, 1989.

In order to fully reflect the policy of "leniency towards those who confess their crimes and severe punishment to those who refuse to do so, atone for a crime by good deeds and render outstanding service to receive awards," and to resolutely crack down on the separatists and those who have committed serious crimes of fighting, smashing, robbing, and arson, the People's Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region has issued the following orders:

1. Those who have plotted, created and participated in riots, committed fighting, smashing, robbing, and arson, and given shelter to criminals and booty must surrender themselves to the police at once, so that they can receive leniency.

2. Those who know the facts of separatists activities and crimes of fighting, smashing, robbing, and arson should expose and report the cases to their units or to the public security authorities.

3. Those people should be protected.

4. Those who retaliate people who inform against them shall be severely punished.  

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Additional thanks to:

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Free Tibet – London, UK