

The New York Times

Tibetan Exiles Meet to Ponder a New Strategy

By EDWARD WONG
November 18, 2008

DEQIN, China — As the flames of anti-Chinese riots and protests engulfed many Tibetan areas of western China last spring, soldiers sent to the towns and villages of the deep river valleys around here encountered nothing but silence.

Political moderation is the norm in this corner of the Tibetan world. A steady flow of ethnic Han Chinese tourists has lifted incomes in recent years. Farmers convert old homes into guesthouses. Monasteries are erecting new buildings.



Perhaps nowhere is there a better example of the “middle way” attitude promoted by the Dalai Lama, the exiled Buddhist avatar who advocates a nonviolent movement for Tibetan autonomy within China but not outright independence.

“Whatever he does, we do,” said Tashi, a driver who keeps a portrait of the Dalai Lama on his dashboard even though such images are banned in China. “We don’t want to make trouble.”

But the calm here could soon crumble, depending on the outcome of a six-day meeting of Tibetan exiles that began Monday in India. The conclave is the first of its kind since 1991. The Dalai Lama has called for hundreds of Tibetans to gather in the Himalayan town of Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government in exile, to help decide on a new strategy for Tibet.

In a statement released Monday, the government in exile sought to play down speculation that a significant shift in its approach to the issue of Tibetan independence might be near.

“A change in policy need not come from this meeting,” the statement said, according to Reuters. “If a change in basic policy is considered necessary, there is a way that is democratic and which has the mandate of the Tibetan people.”

The speculation has been fueled in part by comments from the Dalai Lama, who said this month that his drive to secure autonomy for Tibet through negotiations with the Chinese government had failed. That admission strengthened the hand of younger Tibetans who have long agitated for a more radical approach and who have demanded independence.

Fierce denunciations by the Chinese government last week also bolster the hard-line position. A senior official, Zhu Weiqun, said at a news conference in Beijing last Monday that China would never accept the Dalai Lama’s demand for autonomy. The Dalai Lama, he said, intends to split up China, reinstate a theocracy and carry out the “ethnic cleansing” of Han Chinese.

The rebuke, the harshest from the Chinese government since the violence last spring, contributed to the breakdown of talks between Chinese officials and envoys of the Dalai Lama that had been taking place since 2002. In the eighth and last round of talks, from Oct. 30 to Nov. 5, the Tibetan envoys presented the Chinese government with a memorandum detailing the Dalai Lama's longstanding call for autonomy.

"I think the breakdown of the talks between Beijing and the Dalai Lama is a major disaster, and it has now created a no-win situation for the Tibetans and China," said Tsering Shakya, a Tibetan historian at the University of British Columbia.

The Dalai Lama, 73, issued a statement Friday expressing disappointment.

"Despite this approach receiving widespread appreciation from the international community, as well as the support of many Chinese intellectuals, there have been no positive signs or changes in Tibet," he said.

The meeting in India, he said, will allow Tibetans to discuss "in a spirit of equality, cooperation and collective responsibility the best possible future course of action to advance the Tibetan cause." The Dalai Lama called for the meeting in September, but is not scheduled to personally attend.

Robbie Barnett, a Tibet scholar at Columbia University, said the meeting appeared to be a forum in which the Dalai Lama would allow his more radical and frustrated compatriots to air their opinions but in which, working through his advisors, he would also try to consolidate support for a moderate, nonviolent approach.

China's recent statements, though, have made that task "much more difficult," Mr. Barnett said.

For decades, Tibet has been one of the biggest political conundrums facing the Chinese Communist Party. Tibetan self-governance ended when the People's Liberation Army invaded the high-desert plateau in 1950, and nine years later the Dalai Lama fled to India.

The Chinese government has tried to bolster the economy of the area it calls the Tibet Autonomous Region, whose gross domestic product of \$5 billion in 2007 was the lowest of any region in China. But it has never allowed any form of Tibetan self-rule. Its policies on education and religion have frustrated many Tibetans, and the encouragement of Han Chinese migration to the Tibetan plateau fuels intense resentment.

Anti-Chinese riots erupted in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, on March 14 after the suppression of peaceful protests by monks. The government said at least 18 civilians were killed by mobs. Tibetans took to the streets in other towns as well, leading to a widespread crackdown. Exile groups said that scores of Tibetans were killed and that thousands had been detained or jailed.

On Oct. 29, a day before Tibetan envoys arrived in China for the eighth round of talks, the British government announced that it was dropping its formal recognition of Tibet's suzerainty relationship with China, a status that indicates real autonomy. The recognition dated back 94 years. Tibet advocates said the move by Britain, the only foreign power that had continued to recognize such a relationship, undermined the bargaining position of the Dalai Lama's envoys and emboldened the Chinese government to reaffirm a hard-line position.

All this has contributed to a growing sense of desperation among Tibetan exiles, and it could result in more support for groups like the Tibetan Youth Congress, which believes in pushing for independence.

Lobsang Sangay, a Tibetan research fellow at Harvard Law School, said last week in an essay published on Phayul.com, a Tibetan news Web site, that participants in the meeting should avoid fiery words and creating a schism between those advocating for independence and those pushing for autonomy.

The Chinese government has left no doubts as to its position. On Thursday, a Foreign Ministry spokesman, Qin Gang, said at a news conference that China hoped the Indian government would honor a promise to ban activities “aimed at splitting Chinese territory.”

Chinese leaders, wary of the growing tensions, have apparently stepped up security in Lhasa. A reporter for the newspaper The Australian on a government-sponsored tour of Tibet this month wrote of armed security forces in the streets and on rooftops. Journalists are not allowed to travel to the Tibet Autonomous Region without permission, and the Chinese government has yet to grant a longstanding request by The New York Times to visit the area. The Deqin area lies in Yunnan Province, right outside the Tibet Autonomous Region.

The government’s actions and fierce criticisms of the Dalai Lama do little to change Tibetan attitudes toward their revered leader, whom they would like to see return to his homeland. In this remote area, pilgrims flocking to the sacred snow mountain of Kawa Karpo carry photos of the Dalai Lama. Farther south, in a sprawling monastery outside the town that Tibetans call Gyalthang, known to the Chinese as Shangri-La, a monk’s eyes lighted up when he learned a visitor was from the United States.

“Have you seen the Dalai Lama?” he asked.

Sharon Otterman contributed reporting from New York.