

News Updates

Information and analysis of developments in Tibet



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Nomads killed in pasture fights

Five Tibetan nomads were killed last month in Eastern Tibet in the most recent of a series of armed clashes over pasture lands which, in the last two years, have led to the deaths of at least 29 nomads. The fencing of traditional grasslands - a government policy aimed at settling herdsmen - and the continuing reluctance of the concerned county or provincial authorities to intervene have led to a deadlock in finding peaceful means to settle the conflict.

The fighting has been between the Arig tribe of Sogpo (Ch: Henan) county in Malho (Ch: Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in Qinghai province and the Ngulra tribe of Machu (Ch: Maqu) county, Gannan TAP, Gansu province. The latest incident, on 20 May, broke out when nomads from Machu, on their way to a holy mountain in the disputed area, came across a patrol of five Arig herdsmen and shot them dead.

The disputes started at the beginning of August 1997 over a 20 square kilometre area of land which the Arig township of Bothung has been assigned as pasture by the Sogpo county authorities. Although the Arig nomads, who are of Mongolian descent, have been settled in the area for several centuries the allocation of land and the fencing of pastures in the area have added a more permanent dimension to their position there, provoking the Ngulra into asserting their own claim to the land.

The dispute escalated into serious fighting after a group of Arig nomads went to sell wool in Ngulra where they were stopped and detained by local nomads. The following day, on 3 August 1997, a group of Ngulra nomads ambushed some Arig herdsmen in the hills, killing three of them. The Arig responded to the killings by raising an armed group and getting involved in a series of shoot-outs and skirmishes in the hills bordering the two areas; in an incident on 16 October 1997 a further two Arig nomads were killed and one seriously injured.

According to TIN's sources sporadic fighting continued until the beginning of December 1997 when Jamyang Shepa, abbot of Labrang monastery, and other senior lamas in the area, including Gungthang Rinpoche from Dzoge county in Ngaba (Ch: Aba) TAP, intervened. The two tribes agreed to attempt to find a peaceful solution to the crisis but in mid-March 1998 groups from opposing sides of the dispute confronted each other and two nomads from Ngulra were shot dead; following this incident the conflict resumed and armed groups from the two tribes re-assembled. In an attempt to bring both sides to an agreement Jamyang Shepa again intervened but fighting resumed shortly afterwards leading to the deaths of three Arig nomads at the end of August. In mid-October 1998 a big skirmish broke out between the two tribes and 12 nomads from Ngulra and two from Arig were killed.

Sources familiar with both sides of the dispute say that there have been repeated petitions made to the relevant authorities in Sogpo and Machu counties and to the relevant prefecture and province level governments but no steps have been taken to resolve the problem. Because the area where the fighting has been taking place lies on the border of two provinces there are several levels of authority in the administration hierarchy that has jurisdiction over the disputed grasslands - township, county, prefectural and provincial on both sides of the border. Exile Tibetans from the region say that each level has consistently failed to address the problem and simply told the petitioners to submit their appeal to a different level of authority. Despite the large number of deaths that have been caused by the fighting, no-one appears to have been arrested or apprehended by the authorities.

Several of TIN's sources claim that the county authorities on both sides of the dispute have been supplying arms to the nomads involved in the fighting. Although this cannot be confirmed, the type of weapons that are being used in the fighting - automatic rifles, semi-automatic rifles, hand guns and hand grenades - indicates that the authorities are endorsing the use of arms. One Tibetan who is now in exile in India told TIN: "We could buy any number of guns and bullets. There was no restriction from the government in this regard. Officials from the province would come to teach us how to dig trenches and throw hand grenades."

Reports reaching TIN say that the Arig nomads who are currently using the disputed land have expressed a willingness to move out of the area but because the pastures surrounding them are allocated to other townships they face similar disputes on other boundaries. The option that was previously open to these nomads to move to other pastures in the area is no longer available. Furthermore, the effectiveness of mediation by senior lamas from Labrang monastery - with whom both the Arig and Ngulra tribes are affiliated - is hindered by their lack of authority to intervene in government policy and the already implemented demarcation of land. In his attempt to bring about a reconciliation Jamyang Shepa reportedly proposed splitting the land between the two tribes, giving the Ngulra 12 square kilometres and the Arig 10 square kilometres, but an agreement has so far not been reached.

Conflicts over pastures have long been a feature of nomadic life in Tibet but the issue is of increasing concern today because of the lack of successful arbitration in such disputes - a duty which in the past was fulfilled by lamas who had the authority to settle land usage issues. The traditional role of influential religious figures has been taken over by the state, whose hands-off approach is prolonging disputes, affecting the economic productivity of the communities involved and contributing to a break-down in the sense of affinity among the nomadic population. The state's failure to mediate is of additional concern when the issue being fought over, land allocation in this case, has a permanent dimension to it while simultaneously having its origins with state policy.

Conflict linked to modernisation and fencing policy

The distribution and fencing of nomad pastures has, since the late 1980s, been one of several policies implemented by the authorities in Tibet which, they say, are aimed at improving the economic viability of animal husbandry and lessening the effects of natural disasters on the livelihoods of Tibetan herdsman. Other measures aimed at achieving these objectives include the planting of new grass, building winter shelters for livestock and constructing homes to encourage the permanent settlement of nomads. There are also plans to develop pasture infrastructure, such as communications and the supply of electricity and water to nomad settlements.

The enclosure of pastures and settlement of nomads are considered by the authorities as the answer to raising the living standards of nomadic communities because they attribute the problems facing nomads in Tibet to the unsophisticated methods of traditional nomadic grazing systems. "The out-dated living style [of nomadic herdsman] could neither take full advantage of pastures or cope with natural disasters, nor facilitate the modernization drive of social lives in the area", said Xinhua in May 1996, when reporting that 600,000 hectares of grassland in Qinghai had been fenced, facilitating the settlement of 56,000 of the 100,000 households in the province. The view expressed in the article echoes that of Chinese scientists who consider the backwardness of nomadic life as being the cause of grassland degradation, devastation to livelihoods following natural disasters and lack of knowledge of the commodity economy. They see these and other factors as responsible for keeping nomad incomes at subsistence level.

Fencing of grasslands is now being implemented in Tibet on an extensive scale and in March 1998 China's vice-minister of agriculture, Qi Jingfa, was reported by Xinhua as saying that nomadic life in China would cease to exist by the end of this century. "Practices have shown that settlement of local herdsman helps develop animal husbandry in a large scale and promote cultural, technological and educational undertakings in the pastoral areas", Qi added, saying that the central government begun assisting herdsman to settle in 1986 and that 97% of nomads in Inner Mongolia and 75.6% in northwest Gansu province had been settled by the end of 1997.

TIN has received a number of reports from Tibetans who are now in exile expressing concern over the policy of fencing and the permanent settlement of nomad communities. Points they have raised focus on the disputes that have arisen from land distribution, the disunity among Tibetan herding communities, the scarcity of water in some of the fenced areas, the financial burden of paying for fencing and winter shelters and the effect that assigned pastures are having on the number of children nomadic families can afford to have. The following is an extract from a report recently received by TIN from a Tibetan from Ngaba TAP in Sichuan province who summarises some of these concerns:

"In our area, the Chinese government has forced each and every member of the nomadic community to be settled within a fixed allotment that has to be fenced. This coercion in settling the nomads has unwanted repercussions like:

- (a) each individual nomad family is required to pay for the cost of the fencing material as well as labour charges.
- (b) the nomads have to pay for the fencing wire at a cost of RMB 4 (approx. 50 cents) per meter. This charge alone has caused immense financial burden on many nomadic families.
- (c) every year the nomads have to pay high rates of charges for water and grazing.
- (d) our children are denied educational opportunities because the main schools are situated too far away from their homes.
- (e) the remote location and isolated existence of many of our nomads keep them ignorant about the outside world.
- (f) the nomadic areas are extremely backward, with no electricity, postal service, transport or communication facilities.
- (g) by destroying the basis for sustaining a nomadic style of life, future generations will have no chance to be either farmers or nomads, so the parents are forced to limit the number of children they have and control the growth of our population.
- (h) the qualitative difference with regard to grazing pastures, drinking water, and animals leads to never-ending disputes and conflicts between neighbours and relatives. All the best pasture lands are appropriated by the Chinese government who, in turn, allocates them to top government offices and units."

Other reports received by TIN complain about the disparity of pasture allocation: there are allegations of corruption in the distribution process and concerns about the lack of water resources in some areas. One Tibetan nomad from Golog TAP in Qinghai province who is now in exile told TIN: "The grasslands were distributed depending on one's connections. The officials give bigger and better pasture lands to their friends and those who have given them bribes. There is a lot of disparity in the distribution of pasture lands. Even in the case of water, we have to use the water that is within our fence. My pasture land has no water. Therefore, we have to take the cattle for water to a distance of about two kilometers every morning and evening. Even the grass is scarce. When the pasture lands were distributed, we got land that had red soil. This is not good for

the growth of grass. But I have to pay tax according to the area of land I have. This makes my life very difficult."

The lack of water resources in certain pastures has been a cause of dispute among neighbouring nomad families in areas with scarce supplies: some have been allocated land with good grass but without water, while others have pastures with water but no grass. In an effort to solve this problem some areas which depend on rivers and streams as their source of water have had their land allocated in narrow strips which lead to the water's edge, thereby allowing everyone access. But, as one Tibetan exile from Ngaba TAP told TIN, this is leading to another kind of problem: "In our area there is a large plain and there is only one stream there. All the households have to use that stream and because of this the grass on the small strips of land [that lead to the stream] is damaged because the animals have to walk daily from places without water to places with water." Another source has described to TIN how these strips of land turn into muddy tracks after livestock are herded down to the water and back every day, leading to the further erosion of already degraded pastures.

Several exile accounts express concern over the way that the fencing of pasturelands affects the birth control policies implemented by the government. Although nomad families are in some areas entitled to have three children the fencing of pasturelands has put an added pressure on families to limit the number of children they have. In grassland areas where boundaries are fixed, nomads can only raise as many livestock as their land can sustain. Because increasing herd size to support a growing family is no longer a viable option, many nomads are now having to consider whether they can afford more children while sustaining their standard of living. Furthermore, the demarcation of land means that the younger generation have to wait until elderly relatives in their family pass away before they are entitled to land of their own.

Chinese policies "inappropriate" for Tibetan herders

It is clear that while the authorities may be attempting to improve the living standards of nomadic communities in Tibet the policies which are designed to achieve this are creating a number of new problems. Many western academics who specialise in rangeland issues attribute this to the misconceptions in Chinese scientific thought regarding the traditional structure of nomadic pastoralism in Tibet. These academics argue that Chinese policies founded on the basis of this thought are inappropriate to the problems facing herders and are not tackling the real concerns.

Daniel Miller, a rangeland specialist who has worked in Tibet for over 10 years, argues that the way of life practiced by herdsman on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau represents a highly sophisticated traditional management structure that has evolved over several centuries in response to the extreme environmental conditions on the Tibetan plateau. In an article in the Tibetan Studies Internet Newsletter (Vol.1, October 1998), Miller observes that the very existence of nomadic communities today bears testimony to their knowledge and experience

in animal husbandry. He recognises that pastoral production is influenced by herd composition (yaks, sheep, goats and horses) according to the specific vegetation and natural resources of a particular area and that the movement of herds is not random but complex and strictly managed by the nomads. Miller points out that the ecological factors that are crucial to preventing further grassland degradation and the overgrazing of pastures are not given enough consideration in the policy equation, which is heavily weighted towards the objective of economic development.

Miller's views on the misconceptions of who is to blame for the poor quality of much of Tibet's grasslands are supported by Gabriel Lafitte, Research Associate at the Melbourne Institute of Asian Languages and Studies in Australia, who says that state policy is the likely main cause of grassland degradation in Tibet. During the 1960s, when communisation was implemented in Tibet, herd sizes were doubled and since the restoration of their land usage rights in the early 1980s nomads have sustained livestock numbers at commune levels because of their tax obligations to the state. Lafitte points out that grasslands are therefore carrying an unsustainable herd size. Reluctance to identify state policy failure as the most likely cause of deteriorating pastures is leading to the misdiagnosis of the problems that face Tibet's nomadic people and therefore to the possible implementation of further inappropriate policies.

Dee Mack Williams, who spent 12 months conducting fieldwork in Inner Mongolia in 1993-94, sees the methods with which the Chinese authorities have conceptualised and implemented rangeland policies as being unsuccessful in solving the problems of managing resources at a local level. He argues that "the enclosure policy effectively reconstitutes the open range in accordance with the environmental preferences and cultural biases of the Han Chinese" - namely a meticulously controlled agricultural civilisation. The contradiction of policies with the preferences of indigenous herders has, Williams observes, led to them having a more casual approach to their livestock management and use of resources for production.

Williams describes the Inner Mongolian steppe as "at once a historical product, an economic determinant, and a continuous medium of expression between and among various social groups." Tibetan accounts of the effects of state policy in the grassland areas indicate that it is determined by a decision-making process which only sees the potential of the Qinghai-Tibet plateau as an "economic determinant" while disregarding the historical structure of rangeland management and the complex social organisation among communities that has developed over centuries.

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The Tibet Information Network (TIN) is an independent news and research service that provides information and analysis of the current political, economic, social, environmental and human rights situation in Tibet

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