



Environmental Protests on the Tibetan Plateau

Tibet Watch Thematic Report
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Introduction

The people of Tibet have a deep and heartfelt commitment to their homeland and protests against China's environmental exploitation on the Tibetan plateau have long been a feature of Tibet's resistance to the occupation. Over the last few years Tibet Watch has noted the different forms that environmental protests have taken. As shown on the map below, the protests have taken place across all areas of Tibet. Some have involved significant numbers of people. Some have involved very creative ways of getting the message across. Some have been brutally suppressed. It seems China is determined to politicise any organised activity by Tibetans, regardless of the issue or how it is expressed.

The Tibetan Plateau is an area which covers around 2.5 million square kilometres (970,000 square miles) and encompasses the current Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) as well as most of Qinghai Province and parts of the other neighbouring provinces – Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan. With an average altitude of over 4,500 metres (14,800 feet), it is often referred to as "the Roof of the World". The climate is generally cold and there are areas of discontinuous permafrost. There are also hot springs, although some of these result in columns of ice as the water freezes on contact with surface air.

The plateau is rich in natural resources which China is now exploiting with increasing intensity. The minerals being mined include: antimony, boron borates, chromium, copper, gold, halite, iron, lead, lithium, mercury, molybdenum, nickel, platinum, silver, tin, uranium and zinc. There are also salt lake minerals such as gypsum, potash, magnesium and potassium, as well as fossil fuels including coal, oil and natural gas.

According to the researcher and environmental policy consultant Gabriel Lafitte, China's 12th five-year plan (2011-2015) for Tibet centres on copper and gold. In particular he believes that copper extraction is poised to become "the 'pillar industry' China has long sought in Tibetan mineral wealth".¹ Certainly, much of the transport and infrastructure development in Tibet is aimed at facilitating the construction of mines and the extraction of minerals rather than, as China often claims, creating any benefit for local communities. China often boasts of its achievements in "developing" Tibet. It neglects to mention that the developments in question are designed to fulfil China's vision for Tibet and are generally implemented without any consultation and often in the face of clear objections, even protests, from local people.

Most of Tibet is geologically volatile and vulnerable to earthquakes and landslides. Threats posed by this instability are exacerbated by mining and damming projects. In March 2013 a landslide in the Gyama Valley highlighted the consequences of failing to understand and respect Tibet's environment. Around two million cubic metres of mud, rock and debris engulfed the Gyama (Ch: Jiama) Copper Gold Polymetallic Mine in Meldro Gungkar (Ch: Maizhokunggar) County near Lhasa.² According to local villagers the landslide struck suddenly. It killed 83 of the workers stationed at the mining site.³ Only two of the dead miners were Tibetan - which highlights the failure of such projects to provide employment benefits to the local communities as well as the environmental risks involved.

China's approach to the development of Tibet also prevents it from understanding the plateau and the relationship which Tibetan people have with their land. The climate and terrain of the plateau can be difficult, even harsh. Consequently, "China has persistently described most of Tibet as wasteland, especially the mountains, unless redeemed by mining"⁴. However, the Tibetans have spent centuries developing a lifestyle that works in harmony with the environment. The nomadic traditions follow the seasons and the mobility of the lifestyle makes it sustainable, always moving on and giving the land time to replenish. In addition, the Tibetan people have a deep spiritual connection to their land. Certain mountains and lakes are believed to be

¹ *Spoiling Tibet*, Gabriel Lafitte, Zed Books, 2013, p.141

² http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-03/29/c_124522149.htm

³ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/tibet/9962441/Nothing-found-in-hunt-for-83-miners-buried-in-Tibet-landslide.html>

⁴ *Spoiling Tibet*, Gabriel Lafitte, Zed Books, 2013, p.30

the physical home of Buddhist deities and are considered sacred. Tibetans also see the remote mountains and wilderness as places for retreat and meditation, rather than wasteland. Many see themselves as stewards of a land that has an intrinsic value as a living environment and is more than just a repository for commodities that gain value only once they are extracted and sold.

When interviewed about the connection between the people and the land, one Tibetan told Tibet Watch:

"Tibetans do not learn the value of the earth through science but through our religion and the way our ancestors protected our land over thousands of years. They saved the land for the next generation to enjoy as pure land, the beauty of nature and to have a clean and peaceful environment to live in. Therefore destruction of the land, the mining of sacred mountains and holy lakes, are more than pollution and destruction of the environment. It is a violation of our tradition, religious beliefs and the destruction of our forefathers' legacy."⁵

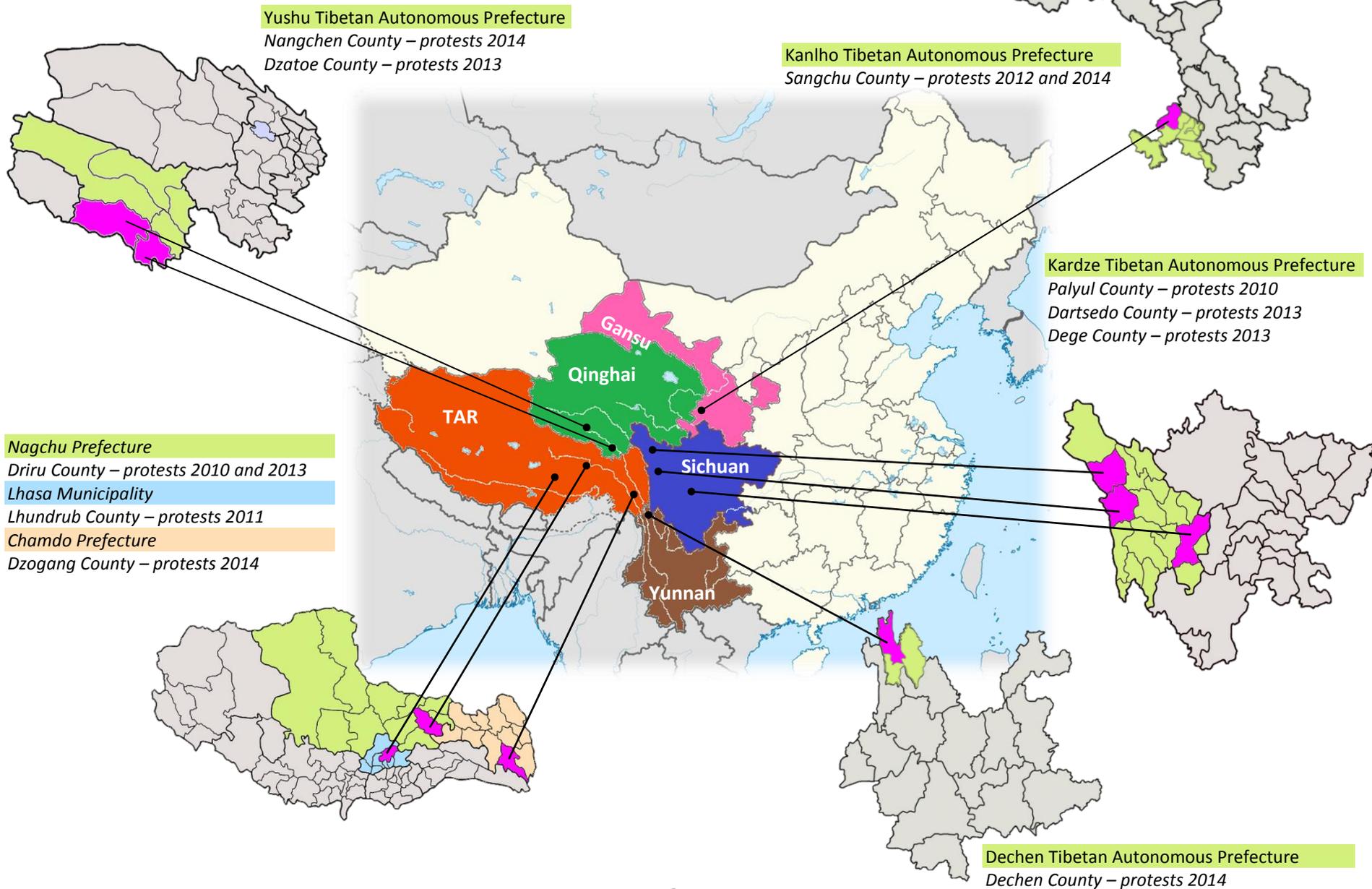
The first section of this report provides an introduction to some of the key issues that have given rise to the recent environmental protests. The second section details the main protests which have taken place in each province across the Tibetan plateau.

Protest Chronology

	2	• Anti-dam and mining protest Driru County, Nagchu Prefecture, TAR
	0	
	1	• May: anti-pollution protest Sangchu County, Kanlho TAP, Gansu
	0	• August: anti-mining protest Palyul County, Kardze TAP, Sichuan
	2	
	0	
• April: anti-mining protest Lhundrub County, Lhasa Municipality, TAR	1	
	1	
	2	
	0	• November: self-Immolation protests Sangchu County, Kanlho TAP, Gansu
	1	
	2	
• May: anti-mining protest Driru County, Nagchu Prefecture, TAR	2	
• August: anti-mining protest Dzatoe Coutny, Yushu TAP, Qinghai	0	
• October: water pollution protest Dartsedo County, Kardze TAP, Sichuan	1	
• December: anti-mining protest Derge County, Kardze TAP, Sichuan	3	
	2	• August: anti-mining protest Nangchen County, Yushu TAP, Qinghai
	0	
	1	• April: anti-mining protest Dzogang County, Chamdo Prefecture, TAR
	4	• July: anti-mining protest Dechen County, Dechen TAP, Yunnan

⁵ Tibet Watch interview, identity withheld

Map of Protests



Environmental Issues

Nomadic Resettlement

Raising yaks, sheep, cattle, goats and other livestock has been a way of life in Tibet for centuries. Nomadic herders range across the Tibetan plateau, using their intimate knowledge of the landscape to find the best grazing for their animals and sustain their families and communities.

China has sought to destroy this way of life by moving more than two million Tibetans from the land they have lived off for generations to barrack-like urban settlements. Torn from all they know, nomads face poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. China has justified its policy by claiming grasslands must be protected from overgrazing. As noted above, this policy shows how little the Chinese government understands the sustainable nature of nomadic husbandry. Traditional Tibetan farming techniques have protected the grasslands for hundreds of years.

Once vacated by nomads, Tibetan land, and its rich natural resources, is open for exploitation by Chinese companies. Some nomads are forcibly relocated. Many, however, are poorly educated and unable to give properly informed consent. They are often persuaded to give up their land rights through deception, threats and bribery.

Relocated families can find themselves having to pay three-quarters or more of the cost of their new, lower quality housing. This forces Tibetans into debt and renders them unable to feed their livestock or families. Robbed of their traditional livelihood, nomads rarely have the skills to make a living in an urban setting. Unable to compete with Chinese-literate urban Tibetans or Han-Chinese immigrants, they are hopelessly outmatched in their homeland's job market. Economically marginalised, nomads may be treated as criminal outcasts and blamed for thievery and other social problems.

After visiting Tibet in 2010, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur for Food stated that:

“Food security issues for relocated or rehoused rural residents include loss of land, limited ability to keep livestock, relocation in areas unsuitable to agriculture, and generally a disruption of traditional patterns of livelihood. ... Moreover, the theoretical foundation of the programme *tuimu huancao*⁶... puts much more emphasis on the role of overgrazing than do the internationally accepted standards in grasslands science. Indeed, the land degradation phenomenon on the Tibetan plateau most probably has several causes. For instance, while climate change is most probably the main driver of environmental changes on the Tibetan plateau, mining is another driver of land degradation in some areas.”⁷

According to an in-depth study by Human Rights Watch that examined Chinese government figures on nomad resettlement, “2 million people - more than two-thirds of the entire population of the TAR - were moved into new houses or rebuilt their own houses between 2006 and 2012. [...] The government intends to re-house 180,000 more by 2015. In Qinghai province, [...], the government has relocated and settled 300,000 nomadic herders since the early 2000s...” Human Rights Watch estimated that by the end of 2013, “90 percent of the herder population of the province would have been sedentarized”⁸.

⁶ China's policy of removing animals from grassland areas in order to halt and reverse grassland degradation.

⁷ (A/HRC/19/59/Add.1) Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Olivier De Schutter, United Nations Human Rights Council, 20 January 2012: http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/RegularSession/Session19/A-HRC-19-59-Add1_en.pdf, p.16

⁸ *They Say We Should Be Grateful*, Human Rights Watch, 27 June 2013: <http://www.hrw.org/node/116646/section/4>, p.4

Mining

Chinese government owned mining companies are quickening their extraction of copper, gold and silver in Tibet. These mines are usually based close to rivers. According to Gabriel Lafitte, it is “gold mining that has most damaged the productive landscape of Tibet, especially by chewing up and spitting out streams and riverbeds all over the plateau”⁹.

As noted above, the Tibetan plateau is also rich in many other mineral resources. Tibet is China's only source of chromium and most of its accessible lithium is in Tibet. These raw materials are used in the manufacturing of various household goods, including computers and smart phones. In particular, lithium is one of the key components in the kind of batteries used to power an increasing number of mobile devices. At a global level, lithium sales are expected to double in period 2013-2017 and then double again before 2020.¹⁰ According to financial analysts at Bloomberg, one of the anticipated growth areas for lithium batteries is in vehicles and China is currently the world's largest and fastest growing market for electric cars. The market is so important to China that, in December 2014, a US firm which makes lithium-ion batteries, was granted \$290 million to finance the expansion of its Chinese operations.¹¹

China is also the world's largest producer of copper and the world's second biggest consumer of gold. The World Gold Council predicts that the consumption of gold in China will double within a decade. Tibet's reserves of copper and gold are currently worth nearly one trillion dollars.¹²

Chinese companies have traditionally mined on a small scale but now large scale extractions are taking place, mainly by large companies which are owned by, or have close links to, the state. Most workers in Tibetan mines are Chinese and the extraction takes place without regard to the local environment and areas of religious or cultural significance.

Water

The Tibetan plateau, which has recently been described as "the Third Pole", holds the third largest store of water-ice in the world and is the source of many of Asia's rivers. The glaciers, snow peaks, rivers, lakes, forests and wetlands of Tibet provide major environmental services to Asia, from Pakistan to Vietnam to northern China. In addition to river based water provision, the Tibetan climate greatly impacts the monsoon rains over much of Asia.

An estimated 70% of China's own water is polluted from uncontrolled dumping of chemicals. Instead of dealing with this at the source, the Chinese government is diverting water from Tibet to north and west China to supply over 300 million Chinese people. It is also damming rivers to generate hydroelectricity which is in turn used to power industrial developments in China. On 23 November 2014, the hydropower plant at Dzam (Ch: Zangmu) started operation. The plant has a generating capacity of 510 megawatts and is the first operation of such a scale in Tibet. Despite the capacity, there are concerns that the plant will prove to be of little value on its own. The environmental group China Dialogue warn that, rather than a single dam, a cascade of dams are needed in order to be effective and that such large scale development “will inevitably threaten the rivers of Tibet and the entire Plateau. If this approach is not changed the rivers of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau face disaster.”¹³

⁹ *Spoiling Tibet*, Gabriel Lafitte, Zed Books, 2013, p.53.

¹⁰ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-07-16/largest-lithium-deal-triggered-by-smartphones-and-teslas.html>

¹¹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2014-12-22/boston-power-gets-290-million-in-chinese-local-government-funds.html>

¹² <http://shanghaiist.com/2013/11/21/interview-gabriel-lafitte-spoiling-tibet-p1.php>

¹³ “Large scale hydropower will fail in Tibet due to freezing temperatures” by Yang Yong for China Dialogue, 17 December, 2014, <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/7617-Large-scale-hydropower-will-fail-in-Tibet-due-to-freezing-temperatures>

Sometimes the environmental issues in Tibet are combined. In August 2014, Greenpeace China released evidence of a giant coal mine illegally encroaching on a nature reserve near the source of the Yellow River in north eastern Tibet.¹⁴ In addition to pollution and the other issues associated with mining activity, the site cuts off the pathway for glacial melt water that feeds the region's rivers and lakes, including the headwaters of the Yellow River. According to the Greenpeace report, coal is the dominant source of energy in China and the state plans - and needs - to increase coal mining and coal-based energy generation in order to sustain the current levels of economic growth. Coal mining is also an operation which consumes a huge amount of water. Some environmentalists warn that China could be approaching a crisis point where it becomes caught between its need for energy and its need for water.

¹⁴ *Giant coal mine in violation of laws uncovered at the source of China's mother river*, Greenpeace China, 4 August 2014: <http://www.greenpeace.org/eastasia/press/releases/climate-energy/2014/red-wall-palace-in-qinghai/>

Protests

Tibet Autonomous Region

The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) covers over 1.2 million square kilometres (460,000 square miles) of the Tibetan Plateau, the highest region on earth. Not surprisingly for such a large area, the terrain is varied – with lakes, mountains, valleys, grasslands and tundra. On average, the altitude is over 4,572 metres (15,000 feet).

The Himalayas run along the TAR's southern border, where the range is shared with India, Nepal and Bhutan. Mount Everest sits right across the border between TAR and Nepal. The TAR is also home to Mount Kailash, which is not one of the higher Himalayan peaks but is one of the most sacred, being a significant pilgrimage site for Buddhists, as well as for the Hindu, Jain and Bön religions. Most of Asia's great rivers have their source in the TAR, including the Indus, Brahmaputra, Salween, Mekong, Yellow and Yangtze.

Due to the difficulty of the climate and the terrain, much of the TAR is still sparsely populated. Many of the people are traditionally nomadic and the area is still dominated by agriculture and animal husbandry. However, the area is rich in natural resources which have attracted an increasing number of Chinese prospectors. Mineral extraction in the TAR is now an intensive industry which plays a key role in China's development plans.

Anti- dam and mining protest, Driru County, 2010 and 2013

Driru (Ch: Biru) County, Nagchu (Ch: Naqu) Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region



Driru is one of the eastern counties in Nagchu Prefecture within the TAR. The area is predominantly rural, with a traditionally nomadic population. The Gyalmo Ngulchu, which is known as Nu Jiang in Chinese and better known to many as the Salween River, flows through the county and passes through the foothills of the sacred Naglha Dzamba mountain, which the Tibetan people believe is home to their local deity. Dams on the Salween have been the source of much controversy and campaigning over the years but at least one has already been completed in Driru.



The sacred Naglha Dzamba mountain in Driru

During 2010 a large Chinese workforce arrived in Driru and told the local Tibetans they were going to build a dam on the Salween. The work went on continuously, through day and night. After observing the activities for a while, local Tibetans noticed that trucks of stone from the holy mountain were being driven away under cover of night. This gave rise to suspicion that the Chinese workers were constructing a mine - either in addition to the dam or instead of the dam - and locals gathered at the site to protest.

They were told by the Driru county head that the dam was being built for the benefit of local people and that if they couldn't accept that then the army would be brought in to ensure the work continued. Locals responded

that there were already three dams on the river, none of which benefitted the local community. They reiterated their commitment to protecting the environment and, especially, their sacred mountain. After a protracted period of negotiation and argument, the Chinese authorities agreed to halt the work and instructed the extraction company to pay compensation for the minerals which had been removed.

In May 2013 a Chinese government-affiliated company arrived in the county and, once again, started work on Naglha Dzamba. They claimed they were working on a hydroelectric power construction project.

Fearing that the latest construction project was, like the dam in 2010, a cover for mining activity, locals responded quickly to protect their sacred mountain. On Friday 24 May, an estimated 3,500 Tibetans converged on the site, while more gathered in the local town.



Protestors gathering near Naglha Dzamba mountain

In addition to protesting, local people filed petitions with various Chinese government offices asking them to stop the mining. Eventually, the authorities agreed to halt the work. Furthermore, they declared that Naglha Dzamba had been recognized as part of a cultural and environmental preservation area. They also promised that none of the protestors would be punished but local sources told Tibet Watch that this proved untrue:

“Chinese authorities didn't keep their words. Later they arrested these three Tibetans and given sentences to them who participated in last year's anti-mining protest. An unconfirmed information spreading around is, all those Tibetans who participated in last year's anti-mining protest would be arrested. Therefore, local Tibetans are living in tense and fear to get arbitrary arrests.”¹⁵

By autumn the area had been subjected to a political re-education campaign. This sparked an escalating series of protests and reprisals, which were recorded by Tibet Watch at the time and later documented in a report published in April 2014.¹⁶

On the evening of 3 October 2013, Dorjee Daktal from Yangthang village, Dathang township, was arrested. Many people believe he was arrested because of his participation in the May protests and news of his detention spread. On 6 October a large group gathered at the local government office to appeal for his release. The authorities reacted harshly and sent in armed security forces which used tear gas, guns and

¹⁵ Quote from Tibet Watch source - identity withheld. Statement obtained once the reprisals had started.

¹⁶ *Diru County: The new hub of Tibetan resistance*, Tibet Watch, April 2014

batons on the crowd. Around 60 people were injured, mostly by beating. At least one man, Lobsang Wangchen, was injured by gun shot. The tear gas also left many people unconscious.

That same evening the authorities imposed restrictions on movement in or out of Driru County. Many residents who were staying in Lhasa or other parts of Nagchu Prefecture at that time were unable to return home. There were also further reports of injured protestors being denied access to medical treatment.



Security forces gathering and preparing for deployment in Driru

As the mass protests started to die down, the number of individual arrests increased. Despite their earlier promises, the authorities started targeting people who had been involved in the earlier environmental protests as well as the more recent events.

Kunchok Drakpa was detained by Chinese authorities at the beginning of December 2013 on suspicion of having played a leading role in the mining protests earlier in the year and died in custody. Kunchok was in his mid-forties, came from Chamram village, Driru township, and had a wife and two young sons. He was known for his commitment to the environment and speaking out against the mining activities. His body was returned to his family towards the end of December. It was clear that he had been tortured. His family were threatened not to disclose any details about the incident.

On 19 December, prison sentences for the singer Trinley Tsekar and two other Tibetans who had been arrested earlier in the year were handed down by the County People's Court in Driru. Choechap received 13 years, Trinley Tsekar received nine years and former policeman Tselha received three years.¹⁷ All three were convicted on charges of (1) instigating the people's protest against mining at Naglha Dzamba mountain, (2) maintaining outside contacts and (3) attempting to 'split Chinese nation'.

Dorjee Daktal, whose arrest on 3 October had initiated one of the larger protests, was sentenced to 11 years in prison. He was given seven years for allegedly being one of the ringleaders of the May protest against Chinese mining activities, three years for lending money to others and one more year for disturbing the work of official permanent cadres stationed in Driru.

¹⁷ Trinley Tsekar was arrested on 20 November 2013. We have not been able to confirm when Choechap or Tselha were arrested. For further details see: *Driru County: The new hub of Tibetan resistance*, Tibet Watch, April 2014

Anti-mining protest, Lhundrub County, April 2011

Lhundrub (Ch: Linzhou) County, Lhasa Municipality, Tibet Autonomous Region



Lhundrub County is located in the *Phenpo* Valley, around 65km north-east of Lhasa, the capital city of Tibet. The Nyenchen Tanglha mountains pass through the county, as does the Lhasa River. The area is agricultural and contains around one third of the prefecture's cultivated land. The main crops are barley, wheat, rapeseed and vegetables. The county also has mineral resources, including lead, zinc, barite, coal and gypsum, and two hydropower stations.

Lhundrub County has been the scene of Chinese mining operations since 1998. Protests broke out in 2011 after a number of Tibetan households were forced to relocate in order to accommodate new mining projects. The local people had previously made numerous requests for the mining to be halted but were told that anyone who opposed the mining would be arrested and charged with political crimes.

Many people were beaten by the security forces during the protest and six Tibetans were subsequently arrested in April 2011. During 2014 Tibet Watch learned that all six were in Drapchi prison in Lhasa. Kunga and Pema had both been sentenced to 12 years; Ngawang Yeshe, Choeyang Woser and Penpa Gyalpo to 11 years and Pema Gyalpo to 8 years.

Anti-mining protest, Dzogang County, April 2014

Dzogang (Ch: Zuogong) County, Chamdo (Ch: Changdu) Prefecture, Tibet Autonomous Region



Dzogang County is located in Chamdo Prefecture, at the eastern end of the Tibet Autonomous Region. It sits in the southern part of the Hengduan Mountains and the Jinsha River (the upper reaches of the Yangtze River) flows along the border between Chamdo and neighbouring Sichuan Province. The Mekong and Salween Rivers also flow through the prefecture.

The area is rich in minerals, including gold, silver, iron, molybdenum and lead. One of its greatest assets, however, is copper and Yulong copper mine in Jomda (Ch: Jiangda) County is China's second largest copper mine. Since September 2013 Chamdo has also been home to the world's second highest airport - Qamdo Bamda Airport, also known as Changdu Bangda Airport – which sits at an altitude of 4,300 metres.

The protests against mining activities in Dzogang County began in April 2014. Road and bridge construction had recently taken place in the area and Tibetans had learned of plans to mine at two sites in the Mazatso valley and another site near the Salween River. They approached the authorities with concerns about natural disasters such as earthquakes resulting from mining activities. They believe the earthquake which occurred in Yushu in 2010 was caused by mining.

On 28 April, approximately 20 young men were arrested by the authorities at a protest against the mines. Although the protesters were released after local people appealed for their freedom, authorities instructed the detainees and local Tibetans not to cause any further disruption to the mining operations. Local families were offered 10,000 Yuan (approx. US\$1,600) each but rejected the offer.

On 7 May, a 39-year-old man named Phakpa Gyaltsen, took his own life in protest at the continued mining activity. He was from Kebar village in Tongbar township, Dzogang County. He jumped to his death off a local school building and died at the scene.



Phakpa Gyaltsen

The previous evening, Phakpa and some others had been summoned to the offices of the local authorities. This had become standard practice following the arrest and release of protestors in April. The authorities had started making regular visits to villages and also summoning groups of people to their offices. In both cases they imparted a combination of threats and persuasion in an attempt to avoid further protests.

On his return from the meeting, Phakpa told people that they should stop protesting and that he would take action. On the morning of 7 May, he climbed to the rooftop of a high building of the township school and shouted “We Tibetans don't have freedom, Tibet needs independence, let Gyalwa Rinpoche [the Dalai Lama] return to Tibet”. When others tried to stop his protest, he stabbed himself and jumped from the building.

Later the same day, a second man, 34-year-old Rigzin, attempted to follow in Phakpa's footsteps.

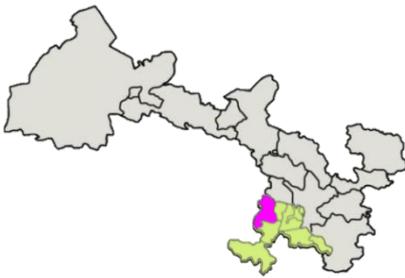
Rigzin was part of the group that carried Phakpa's body back to his home after his protest. Sources report that Rigzin was traumatised and saddened by Phakpa's death and wanted to show solidarity as well as continue the protest against the mining. He stabbed himself three times and attempted to jump off the roof of Phakpa's house. He was prevented from taking that final step by the people around him and was, instead, taken to hospital in Chamdo, the prefecture capital. Police surrounded the hospital after he was admitted and communications in the area were cut. Rigzin's current condition remains unknown.

Gansu Province

Gansu covers an area of 425,800 square kilometres (164,400 square miles) and most of the province sits at an altitude of over 1,000 metres. It lies north of the Tibetan Plateau and encompasses part of the Gobi Desert. The Yellow River also passes through the southern areas of the province. Gansu is very mountainous in the south but flat in the north. The temperature also varies greatly - some areas can be hot in the summer but winter temperatures can drop to -40°C.

Anti-pollution protest, Sangchu County, May 2010

Madang township, Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) TAP, Gansu Province



Sangchu County is in the mountainous southern area of Gansu, in Kanlho TAP. The Daxia River, which is a tributary of the Yellow River, runs through the county and alongside Sangchu town. The area is predominantly rural, with many local people engaged in pastoral activities, rearing yak and other animals.

On Saturday 15 May 2010 villagers from Madang township staged a protest against a local cement factory and the pollution it was causing.

The villagers had originally gathered to start rebuilding the road to Yarshul village which had been blocked by expansion work at the factory site. Staff from the factory and local party officials warned the villagers to stop the road construction and threatened punitive measures. Shortly after that, armed police opened fire on the crowd and fifteen people were hospitalised as a result of gunshot wounds or beatings.

Local people claim that the factory pollutes the grasslands and causes sickness among the livestock. One thousand Tibetans from seven villages in Madang had previously appealed to the factory peacefully by submitting a petition to the authorities.

Self-Immolation protests, Sangchu County, November 2012

Amchok township, Sangchu (Ch: Xiahe) County, Kanlho (Ch: Gannan) TAP, Gansu Province

Since 2009 over 130 Tibetans have set themselves on fire in protest against China's occupation and repressive policies in Tibet. Many of the self-immolations have taken place in regions that have also experienced environmental exploitation.

In an article about self-immolations, Tibetan writer Tsering Woeser lists the "destruction of the environment on the Tibetan plateau"¹⁸ as one of the key grievances behind the protests. Similarly, Thubten Samphel, Director of the Tibet Policy Institute, notes that "rampant mining and the damage done to the environment have driven several Tibetans to register their protest by setting themselves ablaze."¹⁹

In addition to the physical, environmental damage they cause, mining and other projects in Tibet can cause, or exacerbate, a range of problems for the host Tibetan communities – desecration of religious sites, resettlement of nomads, immigration of migrant workers, economic marginalisation and increased security measures, among other things. Gabriel Lafitte describes the "explosive grief" which has built up in Tibetan communities living close to mining sites and explains: "one can map the protests, ... and map the miners, and observe the strong overlap."²⁰

¹⁸ *Why do Tibetans self-immolate?* Tsering Woeser, High Peaks Pure Earth, April 2014:

<http://highpeakspureearth.com/2014/why-do-tibetans-self-immolate-by-woeser/>

¹⁹ *Self-immolation/Tibet/China*, Thubten Samphel, Director - Tibet Policy Institute, Huffington Post, January 2014:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/thubten-samphel/self-immolation-tibet-china_b_4537565.html

²⁰ *Spoiling Tibet*, Gabriel Lafitte, Zed Books, 2013, p.54

In November 2012, two self-immolation protests took place near a mining site in Amchok township. It is reported that monks from the nearby Amchok Monastery offered prayers for both the protestors.



Tsering Dhondup

Tsering Dhondup set fire to himself around 9am, local time, on Tuesday 20 November 2012. He was 34 years old, married and a father to three children. He died at the scene.

Kunchok Tsering

18-year-old Kunchok Tsering set fire to himself on 26 November 2012 in the same location where Tsering Dhondup had carried out his protest the previous week. Kunchok Tsering also died at the scene.



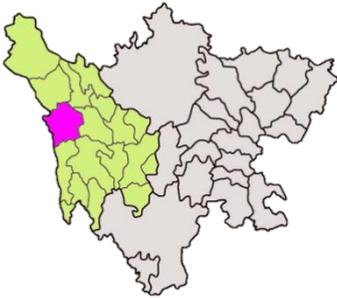
Sichuan Province

Geographically, Sichuan is a province of two halves. The west is part of the Tibetan Plateau and includes a number of mountain ranges, which are collectively known as the Hengduan mountains. Mount Gongga, at 7,556 metres (24,790 feet), is the highest point in the province. The Longmen Shan fault line runs along the edge of the Tibetan Plateau and was the cause of the 2008 earthquake which left almost 70,000 people dead. The east of Sichuan is flatter and more fertile and mostly sites within the Sichuan basin. The Yangtze River and its tributaries flow through the province, from the western mountains down to the Sichuan basin area.

The climate varies with the terrain and many of the Tibetan areas in the west experience very cold temperatures as a result of their altitude. The average elevation is 2,000 to 3,500 metres. This area also experiences a lot of geological activity, including landslides and earthquakes.

Anti-mining protest, Palyul County, August 2010

Palyul (Ch: Baiyu) County, Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) TAP, Sichuan Province



Palyul County is located to the west of Kardze TAP. The prefecture coincides with much of the traditional Minyak region and is home to the sacred Minyak Gangkar Riwo (Ch: Gongga Shan) mountain, as well as steep gorges created by tributaries of the Salween River.

Protests against mining activity took place in Palyul County in August 2010. Initially, a petition against the activities of a Chinese mining company was delivered to the local government building by a group of villagers. They were led by a local man named Tashi Sangpo. The petition was rejected and some of the petitioners were beaten. As the news spread, dozens of local people came to join the original petitioners and set up camp outside the government building.

The protesters remained outside the building for several days, until the authorities decided to have them forcibly removed by the police. The police action was heavy-handed and violent and resulted in at least one Tibetan being fatally shot. There were reports of an additional three deaths but Tibet Watch was unable to confirm this information. The shooting(s) took place around 17/18 August.

Water pollution protest, Dartsedo County, October 2013

Lhagang (Ch: Tagong) township, Dartsedo (Ch: Kangding) County, Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) TAP, Sichuan Province



Dartsedo County is located to the east of Kardze TAP, which also places it at the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau.

On 13 October 2013, a contaminated water pond at a mining site overflowed into nearby rivers causing widespread pollution and resulting in the death of fish and livestock within a 20-30 kilometre radius. The mining project was located at the Kargyaka (Ch: Gajika) site near Balang village in Lhagang (Ch: Tagong) township and had been forcibly set up by the Chinese authorities in 2005, despite strenuous local opposition.

Drinking water for local people was polluted in Balang village, as well as Raloo, Ngangkor, Lhagang and Khunup. As the extent of the pollution became apparent, Tibetans from the affected villages gathered at Lhagang township government offices to present a petition calling for an end to the environmental destruction. They brought large quantities of the dead fish with them as evidence, which they displayed outside the office.



Dead fish exhibited outside Lhagang township government offices

Following this action, communication lines in the area were cut on 14 October. Officials from the county and prefecture capitals visited Lhagang but the Tibetan villagers were very disappointed by their response. The officials promised to raise the issue with the higher authorities but took no further action, aside from increasing the number of police in the area in order to prevent any further action by the villagers.

A number of Tibetans took to social media to vent their frustration and appeal for a solution. The examples below are taken from the Chinese social networking platform Weibo – names and identities have been withheld to protect the individuals involved.

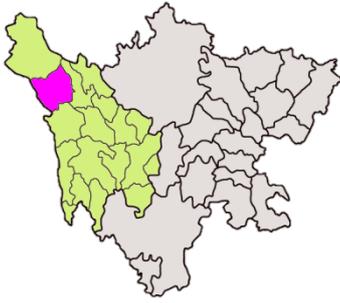
“Save my hometown, I don't want to see my beautiful home land that has been polluted and destroyed by mining. I am appealing to the relevant departments to attach great importance to the issue.” [15 October 2013]

“Stop mining, we have only one earth to live on, you (China) should realise that you are destroying the existence of mankind, you should know we have no other earth to move to, if you don't stop doing this, one day we will die like the fish killed by contaminated water, your (the authorities) words have deceived us many times, nothing can replace the natural resources you have taken from our land.” [15 October 2013]

“Save my hometown, Ganzi Rongda Lithium Co Ltd has destroyed my beautiful land over the years by mining. I know the profits and benefits belong to the company and related departments, but what is left for poor Tibetan villagers are disasters, polluted air and water and destroyed land. Every one of us has to rely on nature and environmental destruction will become a disaster for all future generations.” [17 October 2013]

Anti-mining protest, Derge County, December 2013

Pondha township, Derge (Ch: Derge) County, Kardze (Ch: Ganzi) TAP, Sichuan Province



Derge County is located towards the north of Kardze TAP, on the border between Sichuan and the Tibet Autonomous Region.

In May 2013 a tunnelling project started in Pondha township, which is reported to be a residential area of Derge County. Local Tibetans submitted an appeal against the project, voicing their concern that the

tunnels were being built to facilitate mining and could cause environmental damage as well as damage to their houses. Their appeal was rejected by the local authorities. Since May, Tibet Watch has received reports that many houses in the area are showing cracks and some have possibly collapsed. Only a few of those affected were moved or given any compensation.

On 27 December 2013, around 100 Tibetans went to the project site and tried to stop the mining. On 7 January 2014, Chinese police rounded up and arrested most of the protesters.

A few months later one of the tunnels collapsed and, on 26 April 2014, a five-year-old Tibetan boy fell into the hole created by the collapsed tunnel and died. His aunt also fell and survived but was taken to hospital in Chengdu (the provincial capital) with serious injuries. The local authorities promised compensation for the boy's death and to cover the cost of the aunt's medical treatment. As yet, no funds have actually been provided.



Tunnel entrance in Pondha township



Local people gathered at the site of the collapsed tunnel

The local authorities still claim that the tunnels have been built for transport rather than mining.

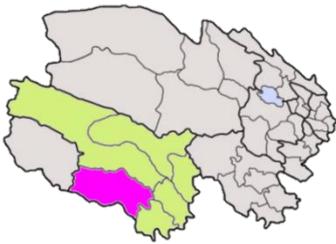
Qinghai Province

Qinghai sits in the north-east of the Tibetan Plateau. Most of the province is over 3,000 metres (9,800 feet) and, consequently, temperatures are generally cool and can be harsh in winter. The area experiences heavy winds and sandstorms during early spring and most of the rain falls during the summer months.

The Tsaidam basin lies to the north-west of the province. This is a region which is particularly rich in mineral deposits, although a third of the area is desert. The province is also home to Lake Kokonor - the second largest salt water lake in the world and the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve. The reserve was established to protect the headwaters of the Yellow River, Yangtze River and Mekong River.

Anti-mining protest, Dzatoe Coutny, August 2013

Dzatoe (Ch: Zaduo) County, Yushu (Ch: Yushu) TAP, Qinghai Province



Dzatoe County is located in the south of Yushu Tibet Autonomous Prefecture. The prefecture sits at an elevation of 3,600m and its population is traditionally nomadic, although many have been resettled in recent years. Yushu is also home to the source of the Yellow River, the third longest river in Asia. Much of the prefecture has been incorporated into the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve.

On 14 April 2010 the area was struck by a devastating earthquake (registering a magnitude of 6.9M_w or 7.1M_s), which killed almost 2,700 people and injured over 12,000 more. Some local people were concerned that the mining activity in the area may have exacerbated the earthquake.

Protests in Dzatoe County began on 13 August 2013 as Chinese workers arrived to start mining operations at sites on a mountain considered sacred by local Tibetans. Hundreds of members of the local community converged on the sites and argued that the mine was not legal.

They later erected posters depicting Chinese President Xi Jinping and quoting extracts from a speech which he made on 24 May 2013 in which he talked about the importance of protecting the environment for future generations. Chinese flags were also flown above the posters as an indication to security forces that the protest was not intended to promote Tibetan nationalism.



Crowds gathered at the mining site

The text used by the protestors – and shown in the photographs below - was taken from the following Chinese media report of Xi Jinping's speech:

中共中央政治局 5 月 24 日上午就大力推进生态文明建设进行第六次集体学习。中共中央总书记习近平在主持学习时强调，以对人民群众、对子孙后代高度负责的态度和责任，真正下决心把环境污染治理好、把生态环境建设好

习近平强调，要正确处理经济发展同生态环境保护的关系，更加自觉地推动绿色发展、循环发展、低碳发展，决不以牺牲环境为代价去换取一时的经济增长

习近平指出，国土是生态文明建设的空间载体。要按照人口资源环境相均衡、在生态环境保护问题上，就是要不能越雷池一步，否则就应该受到惩罚

习近平强调，环境保护和治理要以解决损害群众健康突出环境问题为重点，坚持预防为主、综合治理，强化水、大气、土壤等污染防治，**着力推进重点流域和区域水污染防治，着力推进重点行业 and 重点区域大气污染治理**

习近平指出，**只有实行最严格的制度、最严密的法治，才能为生态文明建设提供可靠保障。要建立责任追究制度，对那些不顾生态环境盲目决策、造成严重后果的人，必须追究其责任，而且应该终身追究**

中共中央总书记习近平²¹



Posters and banners displayed at the protest

The English translation of the report is as follows:

On the morning of May 24, the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee vigorously promoted ecological progress at the sixth collective study session. CPC General Secretary Xi Jinping, while presiding over the study session, stressed that for the sake of the people and for future generations, a highly responsible attitude should be taken, with a genuine determination to manage and govern environmental pollution well.

Xi Jinping stressed the need to correctly handle the relationship between economic development and ecological and environmental protection, and more consciously promote green development, sustainable development, low-carbon development, and never sacrifice environment at the expense of temporary economic growth.

Xi Jinping pointed out that land is the carrier for ecological progress. To balance population, resources and environment, ecological and environmental protection issues should not be overstepped, otherwise punishment should be faced.

Xi Jinping stressed that environmental protection and management should resolve the outstanding environmental problems that harm public health, focusing on prevention first, comprehensive management, enhanced water, air and soil pollution prevention and control, efforts to promote pollution prevention and control in key river valleys and regions, focusing efforts to promote industries and key areas of air pollution control.

Xi Jinping pointed out that only the strictest system and most tight-knit law enforcement could provide a reliable guarantee for China's ecological progress. A responsibility-pursuing mechanism must be established to create a system of accountability, those who are behind irresponsible decision-making that leads to severe environmental consequences must be held accountable, and should be held for life.

General Secretary of the Communist Party of China Xi Jinping

²¹ http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2013-05/24/c_115901657.htm

Despite the peaceful and creative nature of the protest, eight Tibetans were arrested at the scene. A local community leader, Kaitsa Soldor, who was reported to be among the leaders of the protest, was also arrested but other Tibetans were able to get him away from the police. Security forces came later that day to his village to re-arrest him but the local community was, again, able to prevent them.



Troops deployed at the protest site

Shortly after the protest took place, Tibet Watch received a series of videos showing footage of the protest and the violent response from the local security forces.

The videos begin with hundreds of peaceful demonstrators sitting down at the mining site, where they had established a camp and erected the posters of Xi Jinping's environment speech. Police and paramilitary trucks arrive at the scene and paramilitary forces are seen deploying. Police film the protesters as many hold their thumbs up, a request for clemency in Tibet. The final video shows tensions rising with sounds of distress among the protesters and one picking up a stone as others shout "please leave us alone", "they're arresting people at the front" and "don't fight back". Moments later, the sound of automatic gunfire is heard amid screams from the crowd and the video ends abruptly.

Tibet Watch was able to confirm that 14 people had been hospitalised as a result of injuries sustained during the crackdown. There are additional, unconfirmed, reports that up to 40 people were injured in total.



Ammunition casings left at the site

The source who provided the videos also told Tibet Watch:

"Mining is commonplace in Tibet and Tibetans are facing the dilemmas caused by mining all the time. Journalists are not allowed to visit the mining areas and so mining issues are not covered in the news and media channels. In order to highlight the mining issue taking place in my home to the world community, I took these photos and videos of the Chinese military crackdown on the protesters, and I don't mind being arrested if they bring a spotlight on the issue of Chinese mining in Tibet."²²

²² Quote from Tibet Watch source - identity withheld

Anti-mining protest, Nangchen County, August 2014

Nangchen (Ch: Nangqian) County, Yushu (Ch: Yushu) TAP, Qinghai Province



Nangchen County is located in the southern tip of Yushu TAP.

Chinese companies started mining, mostly coal mining, in Nangchen County in 2000. Over the years, local people noticed a detrimental effect on the environment, especially, the grassland of Ahge Kyilung, which has been damaged by pollution and waste generated by the mining site.²³ In 2009, many local birds, especially storks, and also local people were struck down by strange diseases, which were blamed on pollution caused by the mining.

The local people and monks came together to protest and eventually the mining activity was suspended. Tibetans filled in the holes and ditches at the mining sites and covered them over with prayer flags.

On 12 June 2014, a Chinese work team, including the county Deputy Magistrate, arrived at Dompā township and announced that coal mining at Ahge Kyilung village would resume. Local people were told that the decision had been made at the prefectural level so they had to support the project and should not protest or make any objections.

The protests started on 4 August 2014 at three main sites: Goshung Ruchen Menmar Norbūma, Droglung Okar and Ahge Kyilung. All three are villages in Dompā (Dongba) township.



Protestors gathered at the mining site

On 5 August over a hundred local Tibetans gathered at the coal mining site. Like the protestors in Dzatōe County the previous year, they carried banners showing the Chinese President Xi Jinping's statement on environmental protection and mining. They also carried signs proclaiming: "The people of Dompā appeal for a halt to mining and to protect the mineral resources of Sanjiangyuan".²⁴ The local authority representatives present at the mining sites, including an official of Dompā township named Gungtrin, promised the protestors that they would pass on the local Tibetans' appeal to the higher authorities.

The local people set up a rota to ensure that the protest continued. Each day a handful of people from each of the five villages in the area would take turns to block the only entrance road to the ravine where the mining sites were located. The local monasteries also held prayer gatherings in the hope of preventing any violent incidents from occurring.

²³ Waste from coal mining sites can contain potentially poisonous heavy metals as well as various kinds of ash.

²⁴ Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve

Yunnan Province

Yunnan is the most south-western province in China and the Tibetan population is concentrated in the north-western tip of the province, where it borders the TAR. Yunnan is mountainous, particularly in the north-west, and altitude can vary by as much as 3,000 metres (9,800 feet). The province has the largest diversity of plant life in China and also has China's largest reserves of aluminium, lead, zinc and tin, as well as major reserves of copper and nickel.

Anti-mining protest, Dechen County, July 2014

Dechen (Ch: Deqin) County, Dechen (Ch: Deqin) TAP, Yunnan Province



Dechen County sits in the north-west corner of Dechen TAP in Yunnan Province. The area is located in the central part of the Hengduan Mountains and contains the valleys of the Salween, Mekong, and Jinsha (the upper reaches of the Yangtze) Rivers. Dechen County, like much of Yunnan Province, is part of the Three Parallel Rivers of Yunnan Protected Areas, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Two years ago, a Chinese mining team opened a large copper mine at a hill near Martag village of Yama township in Dechen County. They enlarged the road in order to improve access and facilitate mining activities. The road was completed in the summer of 2014 and on 1 July the mining team arrived to start work. They were met by a contingent of local Tibetans who asked them to stop work. The hill which the Chinese team intended to mine was sacred to the local people, who were also concerned about environmental damage.

The head of the Chinese mining team complained to the local authorities and a combined force of approximately 100 police and armed police were sent to the mining site.



Police deployed at the mining site



Images of the injured protestors

Many Tibetans were beaten and a small group (between seven and nine) were arrested and taken to the county detention centre. Some of those who had been beaten were seriously injured and had to be taken to the county hospital for treatment.

The local people were told by the head of the mining team: "If again you obstruct the mining work then we can take any kinds of action to penalty you, such kinds of beating is a small matter, even we can kill some of you as we have fully right to do".²⁵

²⁵ Quote obtained from Tibet Watch source – identity withheld.

Conclusion

The number and geographical spread of environmental protests over recent years clearly demonstrate the importance Tibetans attach to their land and natural surroundings. China's response to the protests has generally been heavy handed and their disproportionate use of force on peaceful protesters violates international legal standards. China has also sought to politicise the protests and those involved. Some Tibetans have understood the risk of politicisation from the outset and have used a creative range of methods to try and focus attention on the substantive issues - including the use of Chinese flags and excerpts from a speech about the environment by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Protesting and raising awareness about environmental issues should not be politicised by the authorities, nor should it be equated with separatism. The relationship that the Tibetan people have with their land and environment forms an intrinsic part of Tibetan culture and identity. It is often articulated by singers, poets and other artists. Unfortunately, China often chooses to interpret such expression as a political statement and a number of Tibetan singers are currently incarcerated in Chinese jails.

Trinley Tsekar, a popular singer from Driru County, TAR, was sentenced to nine years in prison on the basis of his involvement in anti-mining protests and other 'political' activities. Some other Tibetan singers have been imprisoned simply on the basis of their song lyrics. Chakdor from Ngaba County, Qinghai Province, and Shawo Tashi from Rebkong County, Sichuan Province, have both recorded songs and music videos that document environmental destruction. Chakdor was detained without trial for nearly a year-and-a-half following the release of his first album *The Pain of an Unhealed Wound*. In February 2013, he was convicted of "seditiously splitting the state". He is currently incarcerated in Mianyang Prison in Sichuan Province and has been denied basic rights including family visitation. Shawo Tashi was arrested in November 2012 and secretly sentenced to five years in prison.

Some Tibetans have given their lives in protest. Some lives have been taken by China as the authorities have sought to suppress all forms of environmental activism. Kunchok Drakpa was tortured to death following the anti-mining protest in Driru County and many more may yet die in prison. Tibetan political prisoners are often subjected to the harshest conditions in Chinese prisons and China's current policy of politicising environmental activists means that they will also have to endure those conditions in prison.

China's vision of development and hunger for economic growth are both powerful driving forces and the environmental exploitation of Tibet shows no sign of slowing down. But the deep bond between the Tibetans and their land is equally strong and environmental protests are likely to continue, and likely to continue evolving, as long as China continues to ignore the people and the environment of the Tibetan plateau.

This Is How It Is by Chakdor²⁶

Our precious minerals
Being deceptively destroyed by authorities
Making this sacred land hollow
It is a force against our will

The accomplishments of our past scholars
The five major and minor supreme sciences
Using all means to destroy them
It is a force against our will

The inheritors of the Snowland
The heroic male and female youths
Being murdered by authorities
It is a force against our will

The protector of sentient beings
His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso
Cut off from us by authorities
This is our fate
This is our fate

²⁶ *This Is How It Is*, lyrics by Nyak Dampo, performed by Chakdor, released outside of Tibet January 2013: <http://highpeakspureearth.com/2013/music-video-this-is-how-it-is-by-chakdor/>



Environmental Protests on the Tibetan Plateau
January 2015