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China: More Tibetan monks set themselves on fire to protest repression

Monday's reported self-immolation attempt by two young Tibetan monks in Sichuan province is the third such incident since March this year.

According to the official Chinese news agency, the two were promptly taken to a hospital. However, the Tibetan exiled sources say that their exact whereabouts are unknown and that it is possible that one of them died on the spot.

These recent immolations have reportedly been protests against the Chinese government's repression of freedom of religion and cultural rights in Tibetan areas. Amnesty International urges the Chinese government to end these repressive practices immediately and respect the right of Tibetans to practice their culture and religion.

The Chinese government has clamped down on the monasteries at the centre of these incidents: Kirti monastery in Ngaba county, Sichuan Province, and Nyitse monastery in Kardze country, also in Sichuan.

The latest attempt at Kirti this week has taken place only six weeks after the death of a Nyitse monk Tsewang Norbu, who self-immolated on 15 August, calling for freedom and for the Dalai Lama's return.

Tsewang Norbu's fatal act was reportedly motivated by the Chinese authorities' heavy-handed tactics since the Kirti Monastery monk Phuntsok's self-immolation in March.

One of the monks who self-immolated this week is reported to be Phuntsok's brother. Six months ago, Phuntsok is said to have shouted slogans such as "Long live the Dalai Lama" as he set himself on fire.

Phuntsok's act recalled the 2009 protest by another Kirti monastery monk Tapey, who burned himself while raising a self-made Tibetan flag with a picture of the Dalai Lama at its centre.

Phuntsok's suicide this March was followed by protests, mass arrests of people including around 300 Kirti monastery monks, enforced disappearances and possible killings by the security forces. High schools where students expressed solidarity with the Kirti monastery monks were reportedly blockaded and raided, and books burned by security forces.

Two elderly Tibetans - a 65-year old woman called Sherkyi and a 60-year old man Dongkho - died after local residents clashed with security forces whilst trying to stop the mass arrest of Kirti monastery monks. Another Tibetan, Chukpel, 24 died in hospital soon after police reportedly beat him. He had been staging a protest for self-governance for Tibetans outside a local police station in Ngaba.

Three of the monks arrested, one of them Phuntsok's uncle, have recently been sentenced to 10 and 13 years imprisonment for encouraging the self-immolation or for "intentional homicide".

Among the some 300 monks detained in Marchwere children, whom the Chinese authorities say were taken away for “patriotic education”, which consists of denunciation of the Dalai Lama and inculcation in the Chinese government’s version of Tibetan history.

Most of the monks have since been released, but Amnesty International knows of least five more people who have each been sentenced to three years imprisonment in ongoing criminal proceedings. Their names are Lobsang Khedup, Lobsand Gyatso, Dhonyoe Dorjee, Lobsang Dhargay and Kunchok Tsultrim. The exact charges and other details of their trials are unknown, but Amnesty International has frequently documented violations of the right to fair trial in Tibet and elsewhere in China. At least three others have been assigned to Re-education Through Labour.

According to Tibetan exile sources, the security forces took control in Kardze after the Nyitse monastery immolation last month. There were reports that the security forces cut off water, electricity and food supplies to the monastery. Internet and mobile phone text messaging services are reportedly unavailable in Ngaba county.

And in Kirti monastery, the “patriotic education” of monks continues on a daily basis.

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