

# The illusion of calm in Tibet

**After a botched response to bloody riots in Tibet in March, the Chinese authorities have ruthlessly restored order. But anti-Chinese resentment is deep-seated**

VISITORS to Rongwo Monastery, a sprawling 700-year-old complex on the edge of the Tibetan plateau, might notice little untoward. There are no open signs of protest, of the sort that presaged vicious rioting in Tibet in March. But in one shrine a monk chants near a portrait of the Dalai Lama, prominently displayed despite the government's diatribes against the exiled spiritual leader. And police cars patrol the streets nearby: nervous, say residents, that protests could erupt anew.

Security around Rongwo, as it is known to Tibetans (its Chinese name, like that of the adjacent town, is Longwu), is far less visible than it was a few weeks ago when police surrounded the monastery, raided monks' quarters and took many away to jail. No police are to be seen inside the hillside monastery. But a monk says some 200 of his colleagues in the 500-strong community have been detained since Rongwo joined the wave of protests that swept the plateau. Many are still in custody, and, says the monk, it is "very tense". Near Rongwo is a much smaller monastery, which until recently was a popular destination for lovers of Tibetan religious artefacts, production of which creates hundreds of jobs in the area. It is now all but empty of visitors. A monk there says two of his colleagues have been seized by security officials.

As Beijing prepares to host the Olympic games in August, the authorities are trying, unconvincingly, to reassure the world that calm has returned to Tibet and ethnic-Tibetan parts of neighbouring provinces, such as Qinghai, to which Rongwo belongs, and much of which is considered by Tibetans part of their historical territory.

On June 21st the Olympic torch was paraded through the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, without incident but under huge security. Three days later the authorities announced that foreign tourists would be allowed back into Tibet for the first time since rioting erupted in Lhasa on March 14th. But they were supposed to join guided tours and stick to preset routes. On July 1st and 2nd Chinese officials held talks in Beijing with representatives of the Dalai Lama, the second such meeting since the riots. This time the Tibetans were treated to a tour of Olympic facilities in Beijing. But the talks got nowhere. The Dalai Lama's team agreed to talk again in October but said that "in the absence of a serious and sincere commitment" on the Chinese side, it would "serve no purpose".

Despite China's promises of greater openness for the Olympics, foreign journalists still need special permission to visit Tibet. It is usually refused. About 50, none of them from *The Economist*, were invited

to cover the torch parade in Lhasa, but were closely watched. Your correspondent reached Rongwo without hindrance, but was stopped twice at police checkpoints while leaving. Travellers say security is much tighter in Tibetan areas of Sichuan where several demonstrators were shot by security forces in March. In some monasteries police have seized computers and mobile telephones from monks to suppress news of the security operation.

Chinese officials want to win favour in the West by renewing talks with the Dalai Lama's aides. The Dalai Lama is a moderate: many Tibetans do not share his willingness to accept Chinese sovereignty in return for genuine autonomy. But some Chinese officials see him as the source of their Tibet problem. The Communist Party chief in Tibet, Zhang Oingli, used the torch ceremony to assert that Tibet could "thoroughly smash the separatist plots of the Dalai Lama clique". Even the usually tongue-tied International Olympic Committee expressed regret at the remark. Some government-controlled websites omitted it in reporting the speech. This could reflect differences over whether to seek a compromise with the Dalai Lama or to try even harder to erase his influence.

Chinese leaders must be relieved by America's announcement on July 3rd that George Bush will attend the opening ceremony of the Olympics. Relations with the West, though strained by recent events in Tibet, have not been critically damaged. France's president, Nicolas Sarkozy, had been the most outspoken of Western leaders in linking the clampdown in Tibet to a possible boycott of the games. But this week, after meeting China's president, Hu

Jintao, at the G8 summit in Japan, he confirmed he would attend. Sympathy in the West for the Dalai Lama and Tibet is outweighed by the fear of antagonising China.

The leadership in Beijing, however, must also be asking itself whether the crisis in Tibet could have been avoided. As the dust settles, perhaps temporarily, it has become clearer that the unrest could have been far better handled. The rioting could have been stopped well before it engulfed the city, averting the deaths of the 20 or so ethnic-Han Chinese the government says were killed in fires set by the rioters. And had the unrest been more quickly contained, it might not have spawned sympathy protests across the plateau, even in monasteries such as Rongwo, some 1,200-km (750 miles) from the Tibetan capital.

The security forces' response was highly unusual compared with their usual tactics for dealing with protests in Tibet and elsewhere in China. In 1993 the authorities quelled a riot in central Lhasa using tear-gas and plastic bullets. This time they kept well away from the rioting. Even if troops did shoot at people, it was not part of a concerted effort to stop the unrest.

Your correspondent, who happened to be the only foreign journalist in Lhasa at the time, reported in March that the rioting began to spread along the city's main thoroughfare, Beijing Road, in the early afternoon, "a short while" after a clash between monks and security officials outside Ramoche temple some 200 metres up a side street. But in fact the eruption of citywide rioting was slower than this suggested. Witnesses speak of the unrest outside Ramoche temple starting before 11.30am, well before your correspondent

arrived at Beijing Road around 1.30pm and saw the rioting fan out through the narrow alleys of Lhasa's old Tibetan quarter.

Until just before then the unrest, including some stone-throwing by Tibetans at police, was confined to a small area. Oddly, however, your correspondent was nearby in a government car at around 12.30pm and saw no sign of beefed-up security. Foreign tourists say three lorryloads of paramilitary troops arrived at around 1.15pm. They crouched behind shields at the junction of Beijing Road and the Ramoche temple side-street. But the troops scattered within a few minutes after being bombarded with stones. Some of them abandoned their shields. Photographs show that several of the security personnel, although carrying shields and wearing helmets, were in civilian clothes. They did not look ready to defend themselves against rioters, let alone to try to stop them.

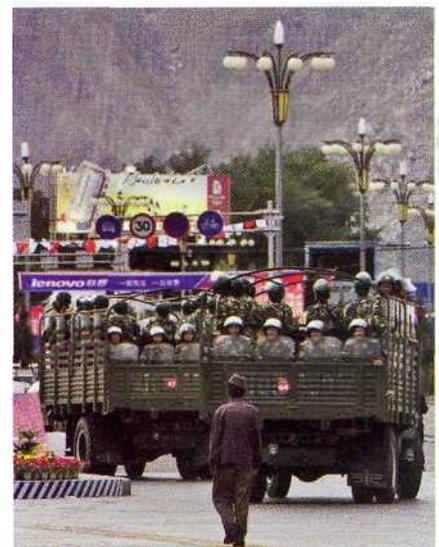
### Why not read the riot act?

There are a number of possible explanations for this half-hearted response to such a big incident. It may have been simple bungling by a security apparatus overstretched by an outbreak of large-scale protests earlier in the week outside big monasteries on the edge of the city. Or perhaps official decision-making was paralysed by differences over what to do, and hindered by the absence of Mr Zhang, the party chief, who was in Beijing at the time.

The slow and cackhanded reaction is puzzling nonetheless. China, after all, faces tens of thousands of protests and riots every year, most swiftly contained. This month in Guizhou province, some 30,000 people protested in Weng'an county at the authorities' handling of the death of a girl they believed raped and murdered. It turned into an ugly riot. But those involved were soon detained. There was also a purge of the local political leadership, blamed for losing public confidence.

The security forces and political apparatus had long been nervous in Tibet. Indeed they had been gearing themselves for just such an outbreak of violence. The government's public claims that Tibet was stable were disingenuous, as was their dismissal of past unrest as ancient history. A series of anti-Chinese protests from 1987 to 1989 culminated in the imposition of martial law in Lhasa for more than a year.

Since then, officials, not least the hard-liner Mr Zhang, who was appointed in 2005, have never let down their guard. In 2006 the security forces, fearing attacks by Tibetan terrorists (not that any are known to be active), staged what the government described as the biggest protection operation in the region's history. The occasion was the grand opening of Tibet's first rail link with the rest of China. Official records say this involved a series of exercises for dealing with terrorist and other "sudden



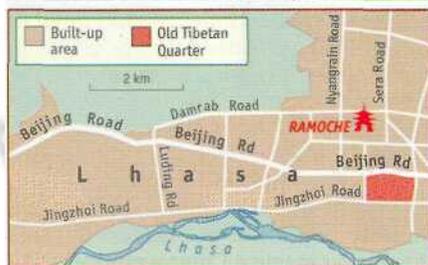
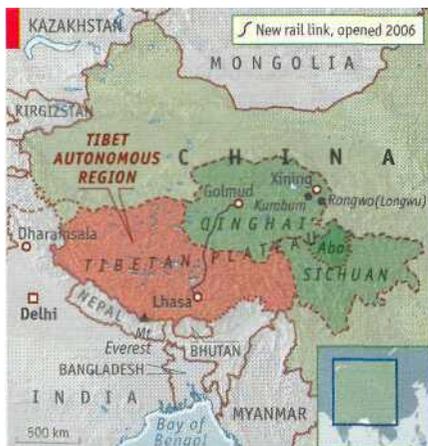
Glee as the torch approaches

incidents" (ie, riots), heightened surveillance of monasteries and the deployment of thousands of paramilitary troops along the railway line. In October last year police and paramilitary officers in Lhasa rehearsed rapid-response measures to cope with possible disturbances during the national-day holiday and the Communist Party's congress in Beijing.

In 2006 officials responsible for religious and ethnic affairs in Tibet circulated a secret document predicting that the train link could create instability in urban areas. Sure enough, ethnic-Han Chinese, many of them recent migrants hoping to profit from a train-related tourism boom, were the main targets of the violence in Lhasa.

Even if officials had ignored such warnings, the protests at Lhasa's monasteries on March 10th and 11th were the biggest in the city since 1989 and provided ample warning of bigger trouble ahead. And Tibetan radicals outside China—not including the Dalai Lama, who supports the Beijing games—had made no secret of their plans to use the Olympics to publicise their grievances. On March 13th, the eve of the riots, security in central Lhasa was visibly tighter than normal in the city, which is ringed by military encampments. That day one of the Dalai Lama's representatives sent a letter to a senior official in Beijing, warning him that unless managed carefully the situation in Tibet might become "difficult for all of us to handle".

Yet by 1.30pm on March 14th, as the riots began to spread beyond the area near the Ramoche Temple, the security presence had all but disappeared from that part of the city. Once the riots began to spread, officials may have worried that any effort to control them would lead to bloodshed that would damage China's image in the build-up to the games. But it is also possible that some officials actually wanted the violence to escalate, as a pretext to impose I



blanket security on the city long before the Olympics. They might have calculated that tensions in Lhasa were likely to present a growing security headache in the run-up to the games, and that foreign scrutiny would become more intense. By refraining from an immediate bloody crackdown they might even gain international kudos for avoiding a Tiananmen-style response. Chinese officials may have been genuinely surprised that, in the event, Western reaction was overwhelmingly negative.

This response was fuelled by a widespread perception outside China, encouraged by reports from Tibetans in exile, that large-scale bloodshed had indeed occurred. But it is still not known whether the security forces shot anyone at all during the unrest of March 14th and 15th in Lhasa. Figures used by Tibetans abroad have fudged the issue. The Dalai Lama himself says more than 200 people have been killed by Chinese security forces since March. But he and his aides have provided scant detail. There is little doubt that several were shot in other parts of the plateau, most notably in Sichuan, where several dozen may have been killed.

In the case of Lhasa the Tibetan government-in-exile has published a list of only 23 Tibetans killed on March 14th and 15th. But it is unable to provide a consistent account of these incidents. In an interview with *The Economist* in May, the Dalai Lama admitted he was uncertain about how the unrest developed in Lhasa and the details of any shooting by the security forces there: "There is a lot of confusion and contradictory information."

No photographs have come to light from Lhasa of violence by police or troops on March 14th or 15th, nor of any resulting casualties. Photographs of dead bodies displayed in the streets of Dharamsala, the seat in exile in northern India of the Dalai Lama, are said to be those of Tibetans shot in Sichuan. Yet camera-equipped mobile phones are widely used in Lhasa and internet services remained uninterrupted during the rioting. Georg Blume of *Die Zeit*, a German newspaper, who arrived in Lhasa on March 15th just after the riots, says he expected to hear residents describe a massacre. But in nearly a week of interviews he was unable to confirm any reports of killings by the security forces.

The relay of the Olympic torch through Lhasa was much curtailed for security reasons—though officials claimed the truncation was somehow related to the devastating earthquake in Sichuan in May. Officials must have been deeply relieved. Their original plans for three days of ceremonies across Tibet would have been a security nightmare—and would have been even worse had there been no crackdown in March. Foreign journalists and tourists as well as a sprinkling of Tibetan exiles would have poured in. Disgruntled Tibet-

ans would have sensed an opportunity.

Whether deliberate or incompetent, the authorities' failure to stop the rioting at the outset has been a bigger setback for Tibet's long-term stability and China's foreign relations than any official is likely to have calculated on March 14th. Chinese officials appeared to condone the xenophobic outcry triggered by Western criticism of the clampdown. The party, after all, prides itself on its nationalist credentials. But the outburst has also shaken party officials. They are ever fearful that they might become the target of their own citizens' anger. The earthquake helped restrain the nationalist anger. But as Sharon Stone, an American actress, found in May when she suggested that the earthquake could have been karmic retribution for the clampdown in Tibet, it is easily reawakened.

#### A matter of trust

The Dalai Lama expresses little optimism. He says that because of the unrest the Chinese government might now rally round the view held by some of its officials that "they can't trust any Tibetans". It might, he said, step up "demographic aggression" by sending more ethnic-Han Chinese into the region. The Dalai Lama talks of reports that the Chinese have fenced off land and speculates that this might be given to settlers. He even says he had heard a report that 1m of them might come in to Tibet once the Olympic games are over.

Such remarks suggest the enormous gulf between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government and the difficulty he and his aides face in separating truth from rumour. Just as there is scant proof that the "Dalai clique" is actively engaged in fomenting unrest, as Chinese leaders claim, so there is little evidence that China is actively seeking to change the ethnic mix of Tibet. Migrants from elsewhere in China, mainly neighbouring Sichuan, are indeed flocking to the region. But this is part of a nationwide flow of tens of millions of job-seeking migrants into the richer cities of China that has occurred since the 1980s. Tibet's problem is the pace of this influx. No official figures are published. But it appears to have accelerated rapidly in recent years thanks to a rapid growth in tourism, which has received a big boost from the railway.

Sporadic discussions between Chinese officials and the Dalai Lama's advisers over nearly three decades have achieved nothing. China has not allowed the Dalai Lama's delegates to visit Tibet itself since 1980, following three trips there during which Chinese officials were embarrassed by emotional displays of public support for the Dalai Lama's team. The last trip they made to any part of the Tibetan plateau was a visit to Qinghai in 1985. Deng Xiaoping, then China's paramount leader, met a representative of the Dalai Lama in 1979. But current animosities make such a

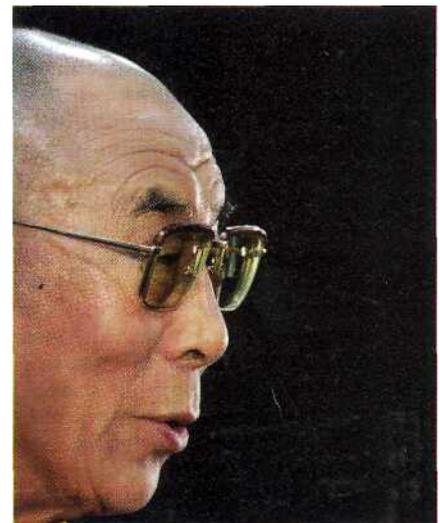
high-level meeting hard to imagine today.

Chinese officials will be alarmed that unrest spread as far as Rongwo. Qinghai, home to the biggest Tibetan population outside the "autonomous region", had long been relatively peaceful and was ruled with a lighter touch than Tibet itself. The practice is frowned upon, but some monasteries there had greater freedom to display the Dalai Lama's portrait.

Even now, amid a plateau-wide campaign of "patriotic education" in monasteries during which monks in some places are being asked by officials to denounce the Dalai Lama, two portraits of him were on display at Kumbum, a monastery close to Qinghai's capital, Xining. Yet official tolerance of such infractions in recent years has not appeared to make Qinghai's Tibetans any more loyal to the party than those in more tightly controlled Tibet.

Curbing official vitriol directed at the Dalai Lama would certainly please Tibetans. But addressing their economic grievances, such as Han domination of Lhasa's shops and taxi services, would help a lot too. The officials who decided to stand back during Lhasa's riots may well have gambled—correctly as it turned out—that the violence would be directed mainly at businesses run by Hans and Huis (members of a Muslim minority) rather than at symbols of party power.

The crackdown has been less astute. Officials have depicted the riots as politically inspired, and have ignored the underlying ethnic and economic grievances, which are rekindling pro-independence sentiment. Hardly any political slogans were uttered during the unrest on March 14th. But as the riots started outside the Ramoche temple, a Tibetan writer said she heard that a citizen, startled and delighted by the authorities' failure to intervene, shouted "Tibet is independent!" Few would dare even to whisper that openly now. But many Tibetans still cherish the dream. •



To China, a jackal wrapped in a habit