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Briefing Paper: Demolitions of homes and evictions of Tibetan nuns at Tibetan Buddhist Institute, Yarchen Gar, Kardze, Kham, Tibet (Ch: Ganzi/Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province)

INDEX: A) Summary Information B) Large-scale demolitions and evictions at Yarchen Gar Buddhist Institute C) Recommendations D) Contacts

A) Summary Information:

- A new round of forced evictions took place at the Tibetan Buddhist community of Yarchen Gar in eastern Tibet¹, with some sources reporting the removal of 3,500 monks and nuns.
- Satellite images taken in late August 2019 show that extensive demolitions have taken place at the site.
- Nuns who were removed from Yarchen Gar have been detained and forced to undergo a process of “patriotic reeducation”.
- One of those evicted in August 2019, an unnamed nun, took her own life in an internment camp after being subjected to particularly harsh treatment including beatings.
- Tight surveillance measures have been implemented in and around the site. These include the deployment of 600 security personnel, checkpoints on the road to the site and checks by security personnel on residents’ phones.

B) Large-scale demolitions and evictions at Yarchen Gar Buddhist Institute: A new wave of residential dwelling demolitions took place at Yarchen Gar in August 2019, levelling almost half of a heavily populated area on the western bank of the Buddhist Institute. The western half of the site is where Yarchen Gar’s nuns live and prior to the demolitions consisted of some 13,000 dormitories.

Satellite images acquired by Free Tibet in September 2019 reveal the extent of the

¹ The references to Tibet in this briefing encompass the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures (TAPs) under the Provinces of Sichuan, Qinghai, Gansu and Yunnan. Following China’s invasion of Tibet in 1949/50 the original geographical territory of Tibet was separated into various administrative units under the Chinese state. The area that makes up the TAR is only a fraction of the area that has historically comprised Tibet.

demolitions that took place in summer 2019² and show the clear contrast of the site from 2013 to 2019. Bare ground can be seen where a densely populated area of the community had stood as recently as early 2019.

Previous rounds of demolitions have taken place at Yarchen Gar in recent years. In 2017, local authorities issued an order stipulating that 3,500 homes be torn down and residents³ were forbidden from renovating their homes or building new structures.⁴ Further to the demolition of residential dwellings, at least 3,500 of monks and nuns were⁵ also forcibly evicted from their homes and places of worship in Yarchen Gar in 2019, contrary to international law. The presence of Chinese security personnel, high levels of surveillance in the area and the extreme communications crackdown, has made it difficult to independently verify these figures.



Satellite imagery of the west bank of Yarchen Gar on 3 April 2018 (left) and 24 August 2019 (right) showing the demolition of houses

Tibet Watch have been able to substantiate the eviction of 70 nuns, who have been forced⁶ to return to their native Jomda County, in eastern Chamdo (Chinese: Jiangda, Chengdu),⁷

² Images of Yarchen Gar demolitions, 2019, Free Tibet <https://www.flickr.com/photos/freetibetorg/albums/72157711045432981>

³ Free Tibet, 24 August 2017, <https://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/thousands-residents-Yarchen-gar-ordered-tear-down-their-own-homes>

⁴ Free Tibet, 25 September 2018, <https://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/china-restricts-renovations-yarchen-gar>

⁵ Radio Free Asia, 11 June 2019, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/EVICTED-06112019163506.html>

⁶ Free Tibet, 8 July 2019, <https://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/further-evictions-and-repression-yarchen-gar>

⁷ Since 2008 Chamdo has been described by the official Chinese state media as the “frontline” of political “patriotic education” campaigns, including an emphasis on securitization including the use of “vigilante” squads, military drills, and the imposition of more police checkpoints.

Sichuan), nearly 300 kilometers away from Yarchen Gar. These nuns were detained for between two and three months and forced to undergo patriotic re-education. Detainees were compelled to praise the People's Republic of China and denounce Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. Reports concerning patriotic re-education are consistent with evidence that emerged following the expulsion of thousands of religious practitioners from Larung Gar, the other major Buddhist institute in Sichuan, during and after 2016. Video footage from Tibet shows what appeared to be a group of Tibetan nuns, apparently from Larung Gar, in military-style uniform singing a "red song" praising the Communist Party.⁸

Among those forcibly evicted last year was one nun, unnamed, who local sources say has since taken her own life. According to the source, the nun was detained in an internment camp with other nuns, and subjected to patriotic re-education. She vocally opposed her treatment, which "often resulted in her being beaten". The source told Radio Free Asia that the nun was taken to the hospital in 2019 "without any apparent health-related issues," prompting further protests from her and resulting in further beatings and in her being returned to the internment camp. The date that she took her life is unknown.⁹

In late 2019 four senior monks were also expelled from Yarchen Gar,¹⁰

Analysis of the demolitions and forced evictions highlights a systematic attempt by the Chinese state to control and limit the influence of Tibetan Buddhism and the rights to religious freedom in Tibet. Furthermore, the demolitions and evictions taking place at Yarchen Gar are linked in context to widespread tourism development projects throughout Tibet.

Eyewitness testimony, and photo evidence from the site, confirms that some of the demolitions were carried out to widen the roads running through Yarchen Gar or construct new roads to facilitate access to the site. A new road has also been constructed to facilitate the journey between Yarchen Gar and Kardze Town. In the north of the site, tourist¹¹ infrastructure, including a new hotel, coach and car parks, has been built to accommodate greater numbers of predominantly Chinese tourists to Tibet. These developments have taken place in the context of a sharp increase in Chinese tourism to Tibet. Official Chinese figures reported by China's state media claim that 30 million tourists visited the TAR, less than half of Tibet's total territory, in 2018¹². Meanwhile, the freedom of movement for Tibetans, particularly Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns, remains severely restricted.¹³

International Campaign for Tibet, 2 December 2009,

<https://savetibet.org/determination-to-resist-repression-continues-in-combat-ready-chamdo-frontline-of-patriotic-education/>

⁸ Free Tibet, 30 November 2016, <https://freetibet.org/news-media/na/video-nuns-forced-undergo-patriotic-re-education>

⁹ RFA, 14 March 2020, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/nun-02142020172455.html>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Interview by Free Tibet with visitor to Yarchen Gar. Date of visit, 26 June 2019. Interview date, 9 October 2019

¹² Xinhua, 10 January 2019 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-01/10/c_137733915.htm

¹³ Annual Report on Human Rights Situation in Tibet 2018, Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, May 2019 pp.25-29
<https://tchrd.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Annual-Report-2018-english-final-min.pdf>

The demolitions and forced evictions, paired with the development of tourist infrastructure, echoes events at Larung Gar in nearby Serthar County. In Larung Gar, at least 4,800¹⁴ people were forcibly evicted and 4,700 buildings, mostly residences, were torn down between June 2016 and May 2017. At the same time, hotels were constructed, and roads widened.

Security measures in Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Ganzi, where Yangchen Gar is located, grew by 295 percent since 2008.¹⁵ Inside Yarchen Gar, the levels of surveillance by the Chinese authorities have been greatly increased with around 600 military personnel. The heavy military presence expands on the system introduced in the TAR in 2012 by then TAR Party Secretary Chen Quanguo that placed almost every monastic institute in the TAR under the direct rule of government officials permanently stationed in each religious institution. Residents are also subject to repeated¹⁶ checks of their mobile phones by security personnel. These security measures appear to extend to the road to Yarchen Gar. A foreign tourist who visited the site in June 2016 reported heavy security on the road to the site, with police scanning Chinese ID cards and checking foreign passports at the checkpoints and cameras placed at roughly five-minute intervals on the road from Kardze Town.¹⁷ Yarchen Gar was established in 1985 and in the ensuing decades the monastic community had seen its population grow to an estimated 10,000 people. The community is sometimes known as “The City of Nuns” due to the large proportion of residents being nuns.

Surveillance by way of an increase of military and security personnel and systems has increased across Tibet. Chen Quanguo, the TAR’s previous People’s Republic of China Party Secretary, oversaw the implementation of the most sophisticated surveillance system in China in the TAR, which has since been mirrored in Xinjiang after he was appointed Party Secretary in Xinjiang. The campaigns that led to the implementation of the surveillance were called “Benefit the Masses” in the TAR and “Becoming a family” in Xinjiang and were introduced in 2011 and in 2016¹⁸ respectively.

These campaigns had the effect of establishing “grid-style system and management”, where communities are segmented into geographic zones so security staff can systematically

¹⁴ Tibet Watch, October 2017, <https://www.freetibet.org/files/Larung%20Gar%20report-web.pdf>

¹⁵ Zenz, A. (2018) China’s Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data: <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-domestic-security-spending-analysis-available-data/>

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, 16 March 2012 - “On January 4, 2012, the Party Secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Chen Quanguo, announced that government or party officials will be stationed in almost all monasteries permanently, and that in some cases they will have the senior rank and pay of a deputy director of a provincial-level government department. The permanent posting of government or party officials inside monasteries is unprecedented in Tibet, let alone at such a senior level.” <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/16/china-tibetan-monasteries-placed-under-direct-rule>

¹⁷ Interview by Free Tibet with visitor to Yarchen Gar. Date of visit, 26 June 2019. Interview date, 9 October 2019

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, May 2018, ‘China: Visiting Officials Occupy Homes in Muslim Region’, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/13/china-visiting-officials-occupy-homes-muslim-region>

observe all activity.¹⁹ In the TAR, the grid management surveillance system divides an area into “grids”, neighborhoods each with 10-15 families. For each grid there is a designated person responsible for monitoring and forwarding information on people’s daily life, allowing the Chinese authorities to prevent political dissent from an early stage.²⁰ This system aims at monitoring society to “thoroughly ensure no shadows, no gaps, no cracks, not giving hostile forces even the slightest opportunity” and in order to “strengthen surveillance and secret intelligence.” Measures taken include house to house investigations compiling “big data” including names, ages, addresses, income sources for each member of the household, and other personal details.²¹ China’s “Benefits of the Masses” campaign in the TAR stationed over 20,000 Chinese officials within the grid system to interrogate and categorize Tibetans according to their political views, designating those with undesirable views for “patriotic re-education.”²² Measures also included separate targeting monastic communities.

Although the latest round of demolitions reportedly began in July 2019, forced evictions and demolitions have been taking place at the site since at least 2001. This activity has escalated in recent years. In 2016 alone, 1,000 residents were reportedly forced to leave²³ and in August 2017, 3,500 homes were scheduled for demolition so that roads could be widened. Residents were told to dismantle their own homes and were offered inadequate compensation for their losses.²⁴ The demolitions have continued despite the appeals of religious authorities at Yarchen Gar. After being forced to announce a previous round of demolitions in August 2017, the Lama at the site called on residents to remain calm, patient and requested them not to provide information about or express opposition to the demolitions on social media. He explained the demolition order was: “like a rock falling from the high mountain - no one could reverse it”. Another senior monk from Yarchen Gar travelled to the TAR to meet local authorities and request that residents of Yarchen Gar (originally from the TAR) be able to stay at the site rather than being returned to the region. The authorities did not approve this request.²⁵

Independent experts and foreign media have not been able to visit the area in order to assess the human rights situation on the ground and to understand the wider effects these demolitions are having on Tibetan Buddhism and the right of Tibetans to exercise their religious and cultural rights.

¹⁹ Adrian Zenz, Chen Quonguo: The Strongman Behind Beijing’s Securitized Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang, China Brief (2017) https://www.academia.edu/35726562/Chen_Quonguo_The_Strongman_Behind_Beijings_Securitization_Strategy_in_Tibet_and_Xinjiang.

²⁰ Natalie Thomas, China deploys mass surveillance to secure streets around ancient Tibetan temple, Reuters (Nov. 30, 2015) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-tibet-surveillance/china-deploys-mass-surveillance-to-secure-streets-around-ancient-tibetan-temple-idUSKBN0TJ13420151130>

²¹ Human Rights Watch, China: ‘Benefit the Masses’ Campaign Surveilling Tibetans (June 18, 2013) <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/18/china-benefit-masses-campaign-surveilling-tibetans>

²² Id.

²³ Joint Communication from UN Special Procedures Mandates; in the field of cultural rights; on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment; on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and on the right to non-discrimination in this context; the Special Rapporteur on minority issues; and on freedom of religion or belief, 7 November 2016: <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=22816>

²⁴ Free Tibet, 24 August 2017, <https://www.freetibet.org/news-media/na/thousands-residents-Yarchen-gar-ordered-tear-down-their-own-homes>

²⁵ Ibid.

Conclusion

Yangchen Gar is an emblematic and fatal case where China's violations of the rights of the Tibetan people to exercise freedom of belief and religion lies at the intersection of exacerbating violations related to discrimination, the right to take part in one's cultural life and to internal freedom of movement and freedom of association by way of security and surveillance measures. Individual and collective expressions of the national and cultural identity of the Tibetan people are being perceived, criminalised and punished as 'acting against the state', as 'endangering state security', 'separatist' and as 'extremist', which are all severe crimes under the Chinese Constitution, Criminal Law and Criminal Procedural Law. The national and cultural identity of the Tibetan people is intrinsically linked to Tibetan Buddhism and as such the right to freedom of belief and religion is at the heart of safeguarding a host of other rights.

Increased security and monitoring of Tibetans exercising their right to freedom of religion and belief are intended to deter Tibetans from exercising their right to participate in their cultural life. Both uniformed and plain clothes police officers monitor crowds at Tibetan religious gatherings, and sometimes close down the events. Similarly as with the case of Yangchen Gar, police surveillance has been increasingly evident at public assemblies at monasteries in recent years, as these have grown more popular amongst Tibetans. This includes restrictions on internal freedom of movement by deterring Tibetans from travelling and gathering at monasteries or other religious sites to attend religious festivals and prayers.

C) RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Immediately halt any further planned evictions from and demolitions at Yarchen Gar, and ensure that all current and expelled residents of Yarchen Gar, are allowed to practice Tibetan Buddhism without discrimination, intimidation or coercion.
- Lift all freedom of movement restrictions, on all current and expelled residents of Yangchen Gar, and ensure that they are allowed to exercise rights to freedom of belief and religion, and to take part in cultural life, without government interference or discrimination. This must include lifting restrictions on remaining at Yangchen Gar, traveling to and gathering at religious places across various TAPs and in and out of the TAR for religious festivals and prayers
- Remove any surveillance measures from Yarchen Gar including security cameras, security personnel, checkpoints and restrictions on who can visit the community.
- Immediately halt all measures of patriotic re-education, for current and former residents of Yangchen Gar, and give a full account of how many residents have undergone patriotic re-education. Furthermore investigate the circumstances of reported suicides at Yarchen Gar, including allegations of beatings in the internment camp and hospital.
- Allow an immediate visit by OHCHR with unfettered access to Tibet including Yarchen Gar and Larung Gar, and urge dates be agreed for a visit from the High Commissioner

for Human Rights to China and Tibet, and/or key Special Procedures as agreed during the UN Universal Periodic Review of China in 2013 and 2018.

D) Contacts:

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