

The Right Honourable Hu Jintao
President of the People's Republic of China
Chairman of the PRC Central Military Commission
Beijing

Letter of Appeal

regarding the crisis in the TAR and adjoining regions

Your Excellency,

Two years ago shortly before the ASEM Summit over 400 representatives from Eurasia's NGOs and civil society organisations convened in Helsinki, Finland at the 6th Asia - Europe Peoples' Forum (AEPF). This Forum is concerned with promoting the rights and welfare of Eurasia's peoples. The next ASEM Summit and 7th AEPF are scheduled to be held in Beijing this autumn. Now Finland's AEPF Network finds it urgent to write to Your Excellency in connection with tragic events in Your country.

General background

200 years ago Chinese civilisation was at a low ebb. Today thanks to the efforts mainly of China's industrious inhabitants and its far-sighted leaders, and even of cooperation from the international community, things have changed. The PRC is fast modernising; its economy is growing at leaps and bounds, hundreds of millions have risen out of poverty, and China is playing an increasingly respected, moderating role in international relations. Many problems still remain globally and nationally, like pollution and global warming. Finland is a technologically advanced country. Rule of law generally flourishes here, and the Swedish minority enjoy genuine autonomy in the island province of Åland. But we also have our problems. For instance, a numerically small Saame national minority is now losing its cherished way of life in the far north due to excessive logging by Finnish firms. Our forests are being depleted.

Tibet, a different civilisation

For thousands of years Tibetans inhabited the Tibetan Plateau, source of many of Asia's greatest rivers. Despite a lower technological level, Tibetans developed patterns of life suited to living long-term in ecological balance with harsh natural conditions. Although their society was hierarchical, they also succeeded in saving capital towards developing a high culture with unique art forms, literature, philosophy, means of achieving mental balance and happiness. Such features of Tibetan civilisation spread peacefully to many neighbouring lands and even to Kalmykia in European Russia. Today they attract increasing interest around the world. People in technologically advanced countries are coming to realise that beyond meeting essential needs, materialism and consumerism don't significantly increase happiness. In Buddhist Asia monasteries offered a respite from feudalism and a fair amount of social mobility for talented individuals. Most Tibetans were accustomed to such ways of life, even if some aspects might seem strange to outsiders.

By mid-20th century China's Communist Party and Liberation Army succeeded in wresting control of China. In 1951 a 17 Point Agreement was signed between Chinese and Tibetan authorities. Tibet reverted to being a part of China. Disagreements gradually arose, and one party or another felt the other wasn't

fulfilling its obligations. Today some points of the Agreement seem unbelievable: According to no.4, "The central authorities will not alter the existing political system in Tibet. The central authorities also will not alter the established status, functions and the power of the Dalai Lama." According to no. 7, "The religious beliefs, customs and habits of the Tibetan people shall be respected and lama monasteries shall be protected." According to no. 11, "In matters related to various reforms in Tibet there will be no compulsion on the part of the central authorities." Chinese comrades were well-intentioned and believed they knew what was best for the Tibetans, whether or not the latter liked it. By 1959 trust between Chinese and Tibetan parties was at breaking point.

China, social and human rights

Uneducated people of most lands tend to be ethnocentric - to consider themselves the standard of humanity. For thousands of years the Chinese considered their land to be the Middle Kingdom and outsiders to be "barbarians". Even Chairman Mao found it necessary in 1953 to write the article, "Criticize Han Chauvinism". Mao emphasised that "The problem in the relations between nationalities which reveals itself in the Party and among the people in many places is the existence of Han chauvinism to a serious degree and not just a matter of its vestiges. ... Therefore, education must be assiduously carried out so that this problem can be solved step by step." Both the fact that Tibetan refugees have continued to flee abroad for decades and that the UN's General Assembly in 1965 found it necessary to pass a 5 Point Resolution deploring "the continued violation of the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people of Tibet and the continued suppression of their distinctive cultural and religious life" suggests that not enough work has been done to follow Chairman Mao's advice.

In recent years much progress has been made in China towards developing the rule of law, and towards formulating appropriate legislation. This is no easy task for such a large country. According to Forum-Asia's study ("Ratification Record of Asian Governments in 2007") Asian countries generally lag behind western countries in human rights legislation and implementation. China seems to be roughly in the middle among Asian countries. Although China has ratified ICERD (International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination), according to the national census from 2000, Tibetans have the highest illiteracy level (47%) of any major national minority in China. What human rights advocates find more disturbing is that China has not yet signed the CED (Convention for Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance) and the CAT (Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment), moreover that China executes more people every year than any other country in the world. Because detentions, torture and executions can be considered state secrets, and because ICERD-DEC (Article 214, individual complaints procedure) is lacking, possibilities for corruption, serious abuses and impunity persist, especially to the detriment of national minorities. In these matters much more work needs to be done.

Misjudgements leading to the present crisis

During the Cultural Revolution Tibetans and their cultural heritage suffered grievously. Thousands of temples and cultural monuments, statues, etc. were destroyed or plundered. Now monasteries are strictly regulated, in contravention of the 17 Point Agreement. Most buildings destroyed during the Cultural Revolution remain in ruins and remind Tibetans of their subordination. In recent times other parts of Tibet's infrastructure (dams, highways) have been developed, and Tibetans are benefitting from modern communication, etc. However, most decisions about

Tibet are made at the Center with minimal representation or participation by Tibetans. In the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) and adjoining provinces Tibetans are mainly in lower rungs of administration. According to some reports the TAR forbids officials to practise religion - in contravention of international treaties. Decades-long restrictions have tended to marginalise Tibetans in their native land and caused much unhappiness. The building of the Lhasa railway was an impressive feat, and it carries some benefits. However, the unrestricted entry of great numbers of Han tourists and entrepreneurs has increased tensions and seriously endangers social stability.

Over the years Chinese Party policy has changed many times. Originally it may have been a simple tactic to sideline the Tibetan authority named in article 4 of the 17 Point Agreement. Among Tibetans the Dalai Lama is their most prestigious representative, and he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, the villifying propaganda over the years may have led to misperceptions among the leadership. In any case the continued refusal to enter into substantive negotiations has landed the Chinese and Tibetans in a dangerous impasse. Of course the Dalai Lama - like the Chinese side - can be a difficult negotiating partner. But the Dalai Lama is a moderate and a man of peace, and an agreement reached with him could lead to acceptance of its terms by Tibet's native population. That could lead to social stability.

The peaceful demonstrations and disturbances of recent days in Tibetan populated areas of the TAR and adjoining Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces show how frustrated many Tibetans have become with conditions and with the lack of tangible progress in negotiations between the Chinese and the Dalai Lama. Once the Dalai Lama passes away, the Chinese will not have as authoritative a negotiating partner, but will be confronted by younger generations of Tibetans who are desperate and far more radical. Instead of developing a harmonious democracy, large swathes of China could plummet into lawlessness and arbitrary military rule.

For Your Excellency's urgent consideration

In our view military repression might work very short-term, but it is no adequate solution to genuine problems, and it creates further distress in the meantime.

- Please refrain from any excessive force while maintaining order.
- Please ensure that detainees are not ill-treated and are accorded due process in line with international standards (CED, CAT).
- Please invite the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to make an independent investigation of alleged abuses.
- Please strengthen contacts with Envoys of the Dalai Lama and enter into substantive negotiations towards achieving genuine autonomy for Tibetans.

Crises present exceptional opportunities to analyse matters anew, to learn from past mistakes and to enter into more successful courses of action. We urge China to make sincere efforts to reverse policies that marginalise the Tibetan people and instead reorientate its strategy towards the local integration and Tibetanizing of policy through participation of Tibetans in decision-making in their own affairs. If China wants to become recognised as a responsible world power, then it should also act responsibly and humanely towards its national minorities.