

Burning of wildlife skins prohibited as tensions rise in Rebkong

Chinese authorities in Rebkong (Qinghai province) have banned the burning of a stockpile of wildlife skins in the main courtyard of Rongwo monastery. The situation is said to be tense across the Rebkong region as large numbers of troops and police have been seen patrolling the streets.

The bonfire had been scheduled for 12 February 2006 by activists as part of an unexpectedly popular campaign against the use of wildlife skins to trim traditional garments (see TibetInfoNet's [Update of 10 February 2006](#)). The skins had been collected since 07 February and had already been made worthless by being partially burnt. Initially, the campaign does not appear to have been obstructed by the authorities and police response had been nervous but restrained. However, immediately before the event, the authorities' attitude hardened and orders were issued banning the event. In what appears to be a demonstration of power, police as well as troops from a military camp close to Rebkong city were deployed across the region. Cadres were verbally warned that their participation in public events linked to the campaign would lead to their expulsion from service.

Because the ban was issued at such short notice, Tibetans who had come to attend the bonfire from across the county only became aware of it on reaching Rebkong city. Some, who had brought skins to burn, had their own fires on their way back to their villages.

Regardless of the authorities' tough line, the campaign appears to have achieved immediate results. In recent days, very few people can be seen wearing fur-trimmed garments in the Rebkong region, despite it being festival season. To wear such clothes can leave one open to public ridicule. A couple wearing skins were reportedly chased along the street by monks from the Rongwo monastery who were teased them, telling them they "looked like animals". Campaign activists have advised the public to avoid any provocation of the authorities and instead burn skins discreetly. In a response to this, the authorities have sent local cadres to villages to convey the message that skins should not be burned.

The campaign has been welcomed by different groups as a Tibetan contribution towards wildlife conservation and, in fact, is nothing more than the implementation of existing Chinese environmental laws and regulations. However, the Chinese authorities perceive it to be primarily a public demonstration of allegiance to the Dalai Lama, since the campaign was launched in response to an appeal made by him during the Kalachakra ceremony held in Amravati, south India to stop using wildlife products. Although it is being organised by secular activists, the campaign's success seems to be due to religious sentiments rather than environmentalism, which remains an abstract concept for the majority of Tibetans in Tibet. The religious influence is also apparent in the date the skins were to be burnt in the monastery precincts. 12 February corresponds to the 15th day of the religious lunar calendar during which Tibetans consider religious deeds and rituals to be particularly 'auspicious'. It also coincides with the local Monlam prayer festival, one of the major events in the religious calendar.

The connection with the Dalai Lama makes the authorities uncomfortable; in this case, the tough stance taken by local cadres has clearly been endorsed by Beijing. Sources have consistently stated that alongside police, troops can be seen patrolling the streets and these do not come under the jurisdiction of the local authorities. A possible explanation is that, though the campaign has a strong focus in Rebkong, similar events have recently taken place in other parts of Tibet, such as in neighbouring Labrang (Chin: Xiahe), as well as in Lhasa and in Kardze, eastern Tibet. This means that the campaign has spread to four (Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai, Sichuan and Gansu) out of five Chinese provinces with Tibetan populations.

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