

Challenges at Shetongmon

Three incidents that have occurred during the summer of 2006 in Shetongmon (Chin: Xietongmen) county, close to Shigatse, where the Canadian company Continental Minerals operates a copper-gold exploration project (see TibetInfoNet's report [5 July 2006](#)), provide a unique insight into how rural Tibetans strive to balance the desire for economic opportunities and an equitable share in Tibet's development, with the wish to preserve the integrity of their local social fabric and cultural identity. Although incidents such as those described here are daily occurrences at numerous mining projects all over Tibet, they mostly escape direct public attention. In the case of the Shetongmon project however, the presence of foreign investors inevitably creates a high level of international awareness. While foreign investors with Western stakeholders are bound to international standards of socially and environmentally responsible mineral exploitation, the Chinese authorities must juggle their all-determining concern for 'stability' with the need to create a conducive environment that will attract further foreign investment into Tibet. Key issues for both parties' success appear to rely on a respectful handling of Tibetan culture and sensitivities, a more direct grass-root involvement of the local Tibetan population at all decision-making levels and a development model that provides direct and measurable benefits to Tibetans ahead of economic migrants. However, implementing these within the politically highly sensitive environment of the TAR continues to be challenging.

The initial incident happened on 19 June 2006, when a team from Continental was sent to assess the potential of establishing a site for tailings near a village situated about 3km east from the actual area under exploration. Up until that point, no work had taken place at that location. Local leaders had verbally agreed to this and an acceptable level of compensation, as prescribed by Chinese law, was established. However, the team began their work before any compensation was paid and some villagers objected to what their leaders had agreed. They insisted, during the course of heated discussions, that payment should be made before any work commenced. They then blocked the road in order to make sure that the team could not leave before the issue was resolved. Responding to this, Continental's representatives [\(1\)](#) agreed to defer any test work until all arrangements were clearly established and agreed upon. They also altered their plans for drawing local water for their drilling, in acknowledgement of the worries of some villagers that their water supply might be affected. This settlement ensured that work could continue. In order to prevent incidents like this happening in the future, a mechanism was put in place through which the villagers would receive regular updates on the work programme from the community relations team [\(2\)](#), so that they could voice their concerns and have them addressed in advance.

The second incident occurred in mid-August 2006. At the site under exploration there were three drilling companies working: a Chinese company, a company from the Philippines and the Australian arm of a Canadian drill company all hired by Continental. Personnel from the latter drilling company brought prostitutes into their camp, thus breaching the policies of both Continental and the drill company. Following protestations from the local villagers, the drill workers were dismissed and the drill company withdrew from the project. Additional measures were also taken, including more frequent inspections, to enforce this policy more rigorously. However, with the drill company's withdrawal from the site, some Tibetan workers, who were being paid reasonable rates by the company, also lost employment opportunities, thus creating some discontent.

The third and most recent incident occurred on the exploration site between 09 and 12 October 2006. It involved four drill workers from the Chinese company contracted by Continental. On the evening of 09 October, the workers, who are ethnic Chinese, were observed by local villagers near the Tsangpo River pump station hunting for wild pigeons. The villagers, who were probably upset by the hunting [\(3\)](#), believed that the workers from the drilling company were attempting to steal the pumps from the station. They seized and beat the workers and subsequently handed them over to the local authorities in neighbouring Rongma. The authorities in turn handed over the four workers to the county police who detained them at Shetongmon police station and launched their own investigation.

On 10 October, before releasing the suspects, the county police and county government officials told the locals that they had found no evidence that the mine workers had attempted to steal the water pumps. This enraged some of the locals who refused to accept the conclusion of the investigation. They pointed out that when pumps had disappeared in the past, the police had been unable to find the culprits, and because of this they prevented the county government officials and police from leaving the village. On the following day, Tibetan county officials went to the village in an attempt to resolve the dispute. The villagers refused to listen to their explanations, claiming that the county government had been bribed. The situation then deteriorated into a verbal and physical altercation between the villagers and the government officials and police, in the course of which some locals shouted: "All Chinese out of Tibet". Eventually, under the protection of local government officials, the county delegation managed to leave the village. However, on the same evening (11 October), an emergency meeting was held between Shigatse prefecture and Shetongmon county government on which a decision was made to involve the prefecture government in further proceedings and, if necessary, to bring in armed police to calm the situation down. According to sources, the government authorities felt that it was unlikely that the villagers would have reacted so strongly to the theft of water pumps and that that demands, such as: "All Chinese out of Tibet", would more likely originate from someone with 'overseas connections'. According to Continental, on the same evening, their site manager made clear that the company would favour a peaceful solution to the incident, as this would be in the best interests of all involved parties. The site manager made it particularly clear that the company did not wish to see any locals taken away by police.

On 12 October, the prefecture and county officials met the villagers again, but after half a day of discussion some locals still disputed the fact that they had overreacted over the issue, and that the police investigation was fair and transparent. Another heated argument ensued, involving some senior local government officials, and police were called in to isolate 4-5 individuals who government officials regarded as being particularly vocal. However, once local leaders assured that such incidents would not happen again, the police eventually withdrew from the village without any arrests.

Continental Minerals dismissed all four of the workers involved from the project, and gave the drilling company a written warning for breaching their code of conduct at the site and imposed a fine of 40,000RMB on them. The drilling company's general manager arrived at the site on the 13 October, endorsed Continental decisions and the fine was paid the following day.

On 14 October, the county government sent in a work team to start a 5-day 'law education programme' in the villages on the site and its vicinity. According to sources, the declared purpose of the programme is to advise the villagers on respect for law and order, police process, as well as the importance of the project for the local economy.

On 15 October, the fine paid by the drill company was handed over to Shetongmon county government. A staff meeting, including all contractors at the site, was held on the same day to reinforce the site's official policies and regulations. It was also decided that Continental would intensify consultations with all villagers after the county government work team's departure in order to receive feedback from the communities and prevent

similar incidents occurring in the future. An additional community meeting with all three villages involved is also scheduled prior to the demobilization of the drilling teams at the end of October. Other activities, like the environmental assessment process and the community engagement program etc, are scheduled to continue over the winter months.

1: The operating company in Tibet is actually Tibet Tianyuan Minerals Exploration Ltd, a company 100% owned by Continental Minerals, Vancouver. However, for the sake of clarity, the company is simply referred to as 'Continental'.

2: According to information provided by Continental, their community relations team is composed of six Tibetans (a community liaison officer for each of the three villages concerned, a community relations manager, and an environmental manager, both from the area).

3: The hunting of small animals, a popular pastime for Chinese immigrants in Tibet, is often regarded by Tibetans as running against their religious feelings. In many cases, ethnic clashes in different parts of Tibet between Tibetans and Chinese started from Tibetans objecting to such activities.

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