

## Mining policies shift in the TAR

Chinese media reported that the government of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) introduced on 8 October 2005 a comprehensive ban on alluvial gold mining. The order stipulates that all alluvial gold mines in the TAR should have stopped operating by 30 November 2005, and all workers and equipment should have been withdrawn from mining sites by the end of December. Official coverage links the ban to an ecological awareness that is allegedly emerging among the Tibetan authorities, thus apparently meeting two crucial Tibetan demands - the preservation of Tibet's environment and the strengthening of local governance. However, it appears that the highest authorities of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) initiated the new policy and that it is primarily concerned with reasserting central control over and a more efficient use of Tibet's mineral resources in the context of China's fast growing demand for raw material.

According to official reports, there were once 41 mining enterprises and 65 mining sites at the height of the 'gold rush' in the TAR and in many areas alluvial gold mines have caused serious and often irreversible environmental damage, including desertification. Regional authorities reportedly closed down 29 alluvial gold mines in July 2003 and suspended 11 others for "rectification". Since then a comprehensive check-up on 97 major mining sites was conducted in the TAR, among which 68 were gold mines. Altogether, 14 are undergoing improvements, 20 have received ultimatums to meet environmental standards and 34 have been shut down.

Official or semi-official press organs like China Daily and People's Daily argue that "worship of nature" and "a fine tradition of handling the relationship between man and nature" have been "at the core of Tibetan tradition", first, within the pre-Buddhist Bonpo religion and then continuing after "the import of Buddhism" to Tibet. But they also say that "gods and goddesses are not the only guardians of Tibet's ecological integrity", and that people should be "reassured to see that tradition is not only alive and well, but, more encouragingly, a thread woven into government thinking", since "local decision-makers have their eyes on the environment".

China Daily sees an "animated discourse" under way in the TAR about how to deal with the mineral reserves. In this context, Jampa Phuntsog (Chin: Qiangba Puncog), chairman of the TAR local government, delivered "a harshly-worded internal speech believed to be the mobilisation order against alluvial gold mines". Similarly, another article in China Daily depicts in dramatic style Duan Xiangzheng, commissioner of Nagchu (Chin: Nagqu) prefecture, on his mobile phone ordering, with "grave face and severe tone" and "accentuating every word", the closure of an alluvial gold mine with the words, "It must be closed immediately, (...) no matter what". The mine allegedly generated 5 million yuan (UK£350,000; US\$618,000; EU€516,000) toward Shentsa (Chin. Xainza) county's 8.5-million yuan budget but, as Duan explains, "we have no choice. It contaminates the water system, and causes serious soil erosion". In the same article, Wang Bin, a deputy director of Lhasa's Bureau of Environmental Protection, is reported to have ordered the closure of four ore dressing facilities in the city's jurisdiction in June 2005.

All three leaders expressively emphasise the environmental rationale behind the current "industrial cleaning". In his speech, Jampa Phuntsog committed himself to ending what he called the "predatory exploitation" of local resources and argued that, since "these mines contribute little to local farmers and herdsmen", the damage to the environment that they caused could no longer be tolerated. Duan Xiangzheng states, "We are not compromising our environment for immediate gains". Wang Bin expresses his opinion that the TAR's "ecological conditions are too fragile to survive blind exploitation".

As well as voicing the alleged ecological concerns of the local authorities, People's Daily present the current moves as taking place "in the spirit of the Notice on Rectifying and Regulating the Order of Exploring Mineral Resources in Various Aspects" formulated by the State Council, China's central cabinet. China Daily also mentions that the move comes in response to central government's call for regulation of the "chaotic mining industries", labelled a "high-profile crusade against illegal mining" with the goal of breaking the "notorious alliance between public servants" and illegal mine owners. The three local leaders also recognise the law and order aspects of the mining issue. Jampa Phuntsog claims that unregulated mining contributes only "a limited amount to the local government"; Duan Xiangzheng notes that the mine he ordered the closure of was "plagued with labour disputes"; Wang Bin is quoted as saying that his regulatory work has been "a game of hide-and-seek between us and illicit miners".

The new policy, however, should not be understood as a rejection of previous, effective policies to make mining one of the staple industries of the TAR. As China Daily confirms, "[It's] not that Tibet's mineral reserves cannot be exploited, but they should be handled with maximum care". It also says that much of the TAR's mineral reserves have remained untouched "thanks to high transportation costs", but adds, "as the Qinghai-Tibet railway is soon to open, tapping those reserves will become economically viable". The last length of track of the 510-kilometre long Golmud-Lhasa railway was laid down on 15 October.

Meanwhile, the industrial exploitation of the TAR's mineral resources has boomed particularly during the last year. Several large projects are joint ventures with Western mining companies, most of which are publicly committed to applying Western social and environmental standards to their work in Tibet. Whether this commitment will be met remains to be seen.

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