



## **CHINA CONTINUES WITH MINING WORK IN TAR AMIDST PROTESTS**

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A recent news report in August this year brought to light the issue of large-scale ‘illegal’ mining in many areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR).<sup>i</sup> The matter was back in focus with news of the massive crackdown by Chinese forces on the Tibetan protesters. Close to 500 policemen were believed to have stormed into the area and fired tear gas shells in order to disperse the crowd, injuring several people in the process<sup>ii</sup>. Reports suggest that at least twelve protesters have been arrested, however ten were released later.

Protests however are not new to areas of the TAR, where major mining projects are on. The locals believe that such large scale projects have an adverse effect not only on the ecology of the region but also the overall sanctity, as locals traditionally hold these mountains to be sacred.

Territorial integrity has remained one of China’s core national interests over the years. We have seen this best exemplified in the case of Tibet, when China invaded eastern parts of Tibet in 1950, and has since occupied the Tibetan plateau. Not only has this been a step in its aim of integration, but China also continues to successfully exploit the area to satisfy its growing demands for natural resources. In fact it is widely believed that one of the primary reasons behind China pumping so much capital into Tibet is that it is keener on the extraction of riches from Tibetan areas, than actual infrastructural development with the aim of modernising it. In a study undertaken by the Chinese Government, Tibet is believed to have deposits of copper, iron, zinc and other minerals worth \$128 billion.<sup>iii</sup> Amongst these Tibet has 40 million tons of coppers, nearly forty percent of China.

However this has happened at severe human costs. Several people have been forcefully moved out of areas where massive mining projects are underway. Apart from this, many Tibetans have lost their lives after the consumption of contaminated water. (This has been particularly common in the Amdo region, the site of a uranium mine). China has also begun gold and diamond mining in various parts of Tibet. This only came to light when a landslide in March this year killed 83 workers, with several still missing. While China was quick to react with its rescue operations, many people in the area claimed that it was a man-made disaster.

There are believed to be two primary reasons for the demonstrations. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the three mountains of the Yushul region where the mining work is on are revered by the locals and therefore any kind of mining activity there is considered as complete disregard of their religious sentiments.<sup>iv</sup> This region is also known to be a source region of the Zachu or Mekong River. Traditionally, local Tibetans regard such river source regions as sacred and preserve them as the homes of nature spirits and protectors of the spring.<sup>v</sup> Secondly and more importantly, the protests were aimed at the fact that such mining projects in these areas are not in accordance with the basic principles of the Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve (SNNR) which was formed in the 2002 with the aim of protecting the three (Mekong, Yangtze and Yellow) river source regions with huge nomadic populations.<sup>vi</sup> The Chinese leadership has repeatedly assured the people of the region of protecting the areas covered under the plan. In fact the protesters also put up huge posters of the speech given by President Xi Jinping in May 2013 on environment protection. Further, there is a feeling of discrimination amongst the locals who feel that by granting mining licenses, the government is going against the law, further alleging that there is a nexus between mining companies and corrupt government officials.

Part of the protest was also because the people were unhappy with the huge influx of Chinese miners who come to the area and thus deprive the locals of any employment opportunities. In fact the protesters formed a human chain around one of the mountains in order to prevent them from starting work.

Therefore as China continues to veil its resource tapping in the garb of infrastructure development in Tibet, and while doing so, authorises violent crackdown by the Chinese police, the Tibetan Government In Exile (TGIE) continues to call on China to allow Tibetan participation in all decision making processes that may have an impact on the social environment and as well as the ecology of the region. However, China seems unwilling to do anything that may give the Tibetans the impression that they can have any role in the decision making process whatsoever. An international campaign may perhaps help in bringing this issue to public interest. However, how feasible this is in the current scenario of strict information control by China is something only time will tell.

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### End Notes:

<sup>i</sup> Chinese Security Forces Crack down on Tibetan Mine Protesters, *Radio Free Asia*, August 16, 2013, at <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/mine-08162013183325.html> (accessed on October 8, 2013)

<sup>ii</sup> Several Tibetans Wounded in Crackdown of Mining Protests, *Central Tibetan Administration Report*, August 17, 2013, at <http://tibet.net/2013/08/17/several-tibetans-wounded-in-crackdown-over-mining-protest/>

<sup>iii</sup> Tibet: China Increases Its Exploitation of Natural Resources, *The Indian Express*, February 8, 2011, at <http://www.unpo.org/article/12230> (accessed on October 8, 2013)

<sup>iv</sup> Yushul prefecture, Qinghai province

<sup>v</sup> Home of Gods and Land of Rivers, *Phayul.com*, September 29, 2013 at <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=34052&t=1> (accessed on October 9, 2013)

<sup>vi</sup> Sanjiangyuan National Nature Reserve, Qinghai Province, formed to protect the headwaters of three rivers.