

[China: End Crackdown on Tibetan Monasteries](#)

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Heavy-Handed Security Exacerbates Grievances, Desperation

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(New York) – The Chinese government should immediately end excessive restrictions on Kirti monastery in the Aba (“Ngawa” in Tibetan) prefecture of Sichuan province, and lift similarly heavy-handed security measures imposed on other lay communities and monasteries in the region, Human Rights Watch said today. These measures appear to have fueled tensions between Tibetans and Chinese authorities in the region, contributing to desperate acts of protest by individuals, including self-immolations, the latest two on October 7, 2011.

Since the protests of 2008 in the region, the Chinese government has imposed drastic restrictions on Tibetan monasteries in the Aba prefecture of Sichuan province and other parts of the Tibetan plateau. These measures include brutal security raids, arbitrary detentions of monks, increased surveillance within monasteries, and a permanent police presence inside monasteries to monitor religious activities.

“Security measures designed to curtail the right to free expression, association, and religious belief in Tibetan monasteries are not legitimate,” said [Sophie Richardson](#), China director at Human Rights Watch. “Even worse, those measures are exacerbating the tensions. Instead, the government should address the region’s underlying grievances.”

Human Rights Watch has [documented a dramatic increase in security expenditure](#) by the Chinese government in the Aba region since 2002, although there were no reported incidents of significant unrest until 2008. These findings suggest that the increase in government spending on security has contributed to provocative policing techniques such as monastery blockades and the mass detentions of monks that have repeatedly contributed to local discontent and unrest.

The increased security measures appear to have been a major factor in the escalation of tensions that have led to several protests in which monks tried to set themselves on fire to bring attention to the situation in Aba. In the October 7 incident, Choepel and Khaying, two young Tibetans who had been monks at Kirti monastery (“Ge Erde” in Chinese), set fire to themselves.

The monastery has been the site of six self-immolations this year, as well as larger nonviolent protests by monks and lay people, many of whom were subsequently detained. The six victims were:

- Phuntsok Jarutsang, 20, who set himself on fire on March 16 to commemorate the March 2008 uprisings in the region. Security personnel tried to extinguish the flames but also allegedly beat Phuntsok, who died the next day, leading to protests in the following days and weeks by more than 1,000 lay Tibetans and monks.

- Lobsang Kalsang, 18. Phuntsok's younger brother, who set himself aflame on September 26. He was hospitalized, but no information has been made available about his physical well-being or whereabouts.
- Lobsang Konchok, approximately 18, who also set himself on fire on September 26. No information is available about his condition or whereabouts.
- Kelsang Wangchuk, 17, a novice monk, who attempted to set himself on fire on October 3 and reportedly suffered limited burns to his legs, and allegedly sustained a serious head injury during detention. Security forces doused the flames.
- Khaying, 20, also known as Lhunyang, and Choephel, both former Kirti monks, participated in self-immolation protests on October 7, shouting slogans as they set themselves on fire. Khaying was taken to a local hospital, where he died the next day.
- Choephel, 18, suffered minor injuries after police and others extinguished the flames, Chinese news sources said. But other sources from the region suggested immediately afterward that he was in critical condition. He died on October 11.
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No credible evidence has emerged so far to suggest that the monastery authorities or its other members were involved in the actions of these individual and former monks. Yet the security response to each of these incidents has been to punish Kirti monastery and the local community through collective punishment, police raids, roadblocks, and show of force by the People's Armed Police (PAP).

In March, following the first immolation incident, armed personnel surrounded the monastery and cut off its access to food and water for several days. New security officials dispatched to the monastery on March 21 imposed a new compulsory "patriotic education" campaign. On April 21, more than 300 monks were taken away from Kirti monastery in ten military trucks and detained in unspecified locations to undergo several weeks of political indoctrination under the guises of "legal education." The whereabouts of those who did not subsequently return are still unclear, though over 100 are believed to have been ordered to return home and barred from returning to the monastery.

Approximately 2,000 fewer monks are living in the monastery now, compared with the number of residents living there in March. The government maintains stringent controls on the movements of the monks, including the requirement that any monk leaving monastery grounds obtain letters from three separate guarantors. Civilian and military police continue to patrol the area, including a special unit which government authorities say will "strike hard" against "violent terrorist activities."

In an apparent move to deter other acts of protest by self-immolation, in September, the government sentenced three Kirti monks accused of having aided Phuntsok in setting himself on fire and sheltered him afterward to prison. The heavy sentences – 10, 11, and 13 years – were widely perceived as unjustified. Two weeks later, several other monks from Kirti were sentenced to 2-and-a-half or 3 years of re-education through labor (RTL), also on suspicion of involvement in the March 16 protest by Phuntsok.

Chinese authorities have said that the protests this year threaten stability, and that Phuntsok's

protest in March was a plot to incite unrest and separatist activities. Shi Jun, the Aba Prefecture Party Committee secretary, said that Phuntsok's immolation was "a premeditated plot" with "an obvious vicious intent and evil motive." Official news outlets have tried to play down the incidents this fall, claiming that they are being used by the Tibetans' spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, for political gains. None of the official commentary on the immolations has acknowledged the Tibetans' grievances.

The self-immolations coincide with a significant increase in spending on security in the area, according to government statistics examined by Human Rights Watch. Those show a dramatic increase in public security spending in Tibetan areas of Sichuan province, specifically Aba and Ganzi prefectures, since at least 2002, with a more rapid increase after 2006. In 2007, a new "anti-terrorist" unit was established in Aba to "strike hard" against "violent terrorist activities." By 2009, per capita annual spending on public security, which covers the civilian police force, the People's Armed Police, and costs associated with running the local courts and prisons, in Aba was five times the average spent per person on public security in non-Tibetan prefectures in Sichuan, and over twice the amount spent for security in the provincial capital, Chengdu.

Incidents similar to the ones in Kirti have taken place in at least one other monastery. In August, Nyitso monastery, in Ganzi prefecture ("Garze" in Tibetan), Dawu county ("Tawu" in Tibetan), was reportedly cut off by troops for several days after monks declined to take part in an annual prayer festival. A single monk set himself on fire, reportedly in protest against the blockade of the monastery.

Human Rights Watch urged the Chinese government to release information about the whereabouts and well-being of all the monks forcibly removed from Kirti, to ensure that its maintenance of public security does not encroach on internationally guaranteed rights, and to address Tibetans' fundamental grievances.

Human Rights Watch also urged all governments concerned with human rights in China to articulate publicly their concerns about the deteriorating environment, and to press the Chinese government to address Tibetans' rights.

"Recent developments in and around Kirti monastery show the terrible human cost of ongoing repression," Richardson said. "Clearly the Chinese government can't spend its way out of this problem – genuine stability is the result of protecting, not denying people their rights."