NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Tibetans mourn as self-immolations near 100

Calum MacLeod USA Today Religion News Service | Jan. 30, 2013
Bora Monastery, China

Six Tibetan pilgrims prostrated themselves face down on the road, then rose, took three paces forward and repeated the dusty act of devotion around the 250-year-old monastery.

It is a ritual that Tibetans have practiced for centuries. Despite wars and a communist takeover, the Tibetan people's age-old attachment to their Buddhist faith remains.

But a deadly development on this eastern edge of the high Tibetan plateau has made this small community tense and fearful.

On Tuesday, Kunchok Kyab, 26, set fire to himself near the monastery in an apparent protest against Chinese rule. The Tibetan farmer, married with an infant son, died from his injuries, reported Tibetan exile media.

His self-immolation, the third in Bora, took the total to 99 since the first such protest in February 2009, according to the Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, India. More than 80 such desperate acts have happened in the last 12 months alone.

"We can understand those that self-immolate, as their feelings of frustration are shared by all Tibetans," said a wheat farmer, 23, near Labrang Monastery. "We all want the Dalai Lama to return and religious freedom for Tibet, that's why they do it."

Tibetans who spoke with a reporter requested anonymity out of fear of retribution from Chinese police.

The rise in public protest suicides is a major concern for the government, which in 2008 faced violent riots in the Tibetan capital Lhasa and a wave of protests in Tibetan areas. Government authorities have responded to the protesters with more crackdowns.

In its latest move, the Chinese government now treats self-immolation as a crime and charges anyone inciting the act with "intentional murder." Seven people in Tsoe were arrested this month for their alleged role in an October self-immolation, and two others went on trial Saturday in Sichuan Province on a similar charge, reported Xinhua, China's official news agency. Authorities have increased security and restricted access to the most restive towns and monasteries.

Tashi Thuntsok, spokesman for the Tibetan government-in-exile, says Beijing is to blame for the deaths.

The self-immolations are caused by "political repression, cultural assimilation, religious suppression and environmental destruction. If China could see reality and alleviate the sufferings and grievances of Tibetans in Tibet, there would be no such drastic actions or demonstrations," Tashi said.

China asserted authority over Tibet in 1951. Tibet's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, 77, fled to India after a failed uprising in 1959 and established a government in exile. Beijing tightly controls the Himalayan region and

accuses the Dalai Lama and exile organizations of plotting the self-immolations. Some Tibetans say that communist rule is denying them basic freedoms and that authorities are wiping out their culture.

Eight self-immolations have occurred inside what China calls the Tibet Autonomous Region, with the rest scattered across the ethnic Tibetan areas of three neighboring provinces. In the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of south Gansu province, in the region Tibetans call Amdo, local residents expressed sadness last week at the ongoing loss of life and appeared fearful of the security crackdown. Several strongly rejected Beijing's argument that the fiery protests are organized by outsiders.

Bora has a history of defying Chinese authorities. In 2008, horsemen descended on Bora for a dramatic protest that included raising the illegal flag of Tibetan independence. Last March, more than 60 monks from the monastery held a protest march.

"We must preserve our language and our religion; they are fundamental to Tibetan culture," said one student of Tibetan literature, rotating some of Bora Monastery's many Buddhist prayer wheels to gain spiritual merit. In nearby Tsoe, where she studies, new street slogans reveal the Chinese government's latest propaganda campaign.

"Respect life, love living" reads one red banner outside a college campus, joining the perennial calls for "national unity" and "harmonious society." In colleges throughout ethnic Tibetan areas, officials give lectures to warn students against self-immolation and to blame the Dalai Lama for causing trouble.

The Chinese government says it protects Tibetan culture, citing projects such as the $48 million renovation of Labrang, one of the key monasteries in Tibetan Buddhism, two hours' drive from Bora. The surrounding town, Sangchu, is fast expanding, but the growth appears mostly in its Han Chinese half, not the traditional, one-story Tibetan quarters.

"Religion is a paradox in China, as the regime both suppresses it severely and sponsors it," said Michael Davis, an American expert on Tibet at the University of Hong Kong.

Chinese officials struggle to understand Tibetan frustration, Davis said.

Rising self-awareness among Tibetans combines with Chinese repression to spark resentment and resistance, Davis said. Self-immolations will continue as long as Tibetans feel they lack other avenues to express grievances, such as anger at language policies aimed at assimilating Tibetans, he added.

"They think 'you ungrateful people, you're biting the hands that feed you,' but the money that has poured into Tibetan regions is often viewed as benefiting the Chinese, not the Tibetans," he said.

[Calum MacLeod writes for *USA Today*.]

Source URL (retrieved on *12/11/2013 - 21:53*): http://ncronline.org/news/global/tibetans-mourn-self-immolations-near-100