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View videos via Tsering Woesser's Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/tsering.gopatsang/posts/2073893206163458>

Fears for extent of damage after major fire at sacred Jokhang Temple during Tibetan New Year

- The extent of damage to the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, one of the holiest and ancient sites in Tibet, is still unknown after a major fire on the second day of the Tibetan New Year (Losar). Videos posted online showed flames shooting from the roof of one of the chapels of the seventh-century temple on Saturday (February 17); Tibetans could be heard weeping and praying.
- Damage may be more widespread than the authorities acknowledge, and reports that communications are being blocked and posts about the fire on social media deleted, consistent with the oppressive political climate in Lhasa. Thousands of pilgrims are currently in Tibet's capital for New Year.

The Chinese authorities took several hours to confirm the fire at the Jokhang, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site, and immediately downplayed it, stating that it was under control and that there had been no casualties. In apparent attempts to give the impression that the situation is normal, despite worldwide distress and concern at the news, the Chinese state media posted on February 18, 2018 a cheery image of Tibet Autonomous Region Party Secretary Wu Yingjie at the square in front of the temple engaging in "cordial exchanges with all ethnic groups" following the partial re-opening of the temple on February 18, 2018.¹ The main shrine remains closed.

A Tibetan who has spoken to pilgrims in Lhasa told ICT: "The fire was a devastating sight for Tibetans, and people were very emotional. Many of them interpreted it as a tragic omen, happening on the second day of Losar."

The Chinese state media has so far released no information on the extent of fire damage. Lhasa was already under tight lockdown during Losar and in the buildup to the anniversary of the March uprising in 1959 and protests in Lhasa and across Tibet from March 10, 2008. A short news bulletin on February 17, 2018, announced that Party Secretary Wu had "rushed to the scene" after the fire began at 18.40 (Lhasa time).² According to Tibetan sources, access to the area was immediately restricted and Tibetans were apparently warned not to share any more photographs or videos online. The state media network Global Times confirmed the fire on the same day, posting the news around five hours after the fire broke out.³

¹ Chinese state media article, 'Jokhang Temple opening up', February 18, 2018, http://news.online.sh.cn/news/gb/content/2018-02/18/content_8784960.htm

² Chinese state media, February 17, 2018, citing source as Tibet Daily: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2018-02-17/doc-fyrrmye2398964.shtml> Xinhua also posted news that the fire had been extinguished, posting the information at 23.45 hours on February 17: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/17/c_136982222.htm

³ Global Times, 'Fire breaks out at Tibet's Jokhang Temple, February 17, 2018, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1089818.shtml>

A Tibetan journalist, Tsering Kyi, posted that social media posts about the fire were being deleted by the Chinese authorities, writing: "The topic has been one of the hottest topics and most searched topic today on Chinese social media. Yet there is no single personal post and was removed in the cyberspace immediately."⁴

The fire apparently began in a building near the Jokhang, with some sources saying this was the Meru Nyingpa monastery in the alleyways of the Barkhor, and then spread. One source in touch with an eyewitness said that several buildings nearby had been burnt to the ground, although that could not be confirmed. The fire broke out as Tibetans are celebrating Losar, the new Year of the Dog, which began on Friday (February 16), which this year fell on the same day as the Chinese lunar New Year.

The Jowo statue, the most sacred Buddhist icon in Tibet is undamaged, according to reports from sources in Lhasa.

The Jokhang was recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2000 as part of a 'Historic Ensemble Site', and is due to be discussed at the next session of the World Heritage Committee in Bahrain in June. Indicating a level of concern about cultural preservation issues in Lhasa, which has been subjected to rapid development involving destruction of Tibetan heritage, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee asked the Chinese government last year for an updated report on the state of conservation of the Potala Palace, Norbulingka and Jokhang sites, and is due to evaluate the response in June (2018).

At the heart of the Barkhor area, the Jokhang has been the site for numerous peaceful protests against Chinese rule, and security is likely to be intensified still further during the upcoming March 10 anniversary period, when the entire Tibet Autonomous Region is generally closed to foreigners.

The Jokhang is the most sacred of Tibet's religious buildings, and is regarded as the religious heart of Tibet and of the Tibetan cultural world, housing over 3,000 images of Buddha and other deities and historical figures. It was founded under the reign of Songsten Gampo, who is believed to have brought Buddhism to Tibet, and enlarged substantially in 1610 under the leadership of the Fifth Dalai Lama, who also presided over the construction of the Potala Palace. The two buildings served to reinforce Lhasa's twin role as Tibet's political and religious center, central to the role of the Fifth Dalai Lama, who died in 1682, as the first Dalai Lama to wield effective temporal and spiritual power over all Tibet.

Tibetan writer Tsering Woesser, who lives in Beijing, told AFP she was "very worried" about the Jokhang, saying: "Tibetans consider Lhasa to be a sacred place, but Jokhang is a sacred place within that sacred place - the most sacred in all of Tibet. Some people say it's only because of Jokhang that the holy city of Lhasa exists at all. No matter where they are in the world, Tibetans all wish to come to Lhasa to pray at Jokhang; it's the wish of a lifetime. Many who make pilgrimage to Lhasa prostrating do so just to visit the temple."⁵

⁴ Tsering Kyi microblog on February 18, @dreamlhasa

⁵ AFP report, February 18, 2018: <https://www.afp.com/en/news/717/fire-hit-jokhang-temple-streets-reopen-after-blaze-tibet-holy-site-doc-10a2n61>