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New fears for historic structure of Jokhang temple after major fire, as China covers up extent of damage

- There is still no clarity over the extent of the damage caused by a major fire at the sacred Jokhang Temple in Lhasa on the second day of Tibetan New Year, February 17, largely due to China's imposition of restrictions on the flow of information. There are now new fears that the authorities are engaged in inappropriate repair work to the historic structure - a UNESCO World Heritage site - in order to cover up the damage, which is likely to be extensive, based on assessment by experts of post-fire video footage and stills.
- An apparent delay of half an hour in fighting the fire has not been explained, given that China told the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in December that the Jokhang Temple has its own fire brigade, based 24 hours at the building, "for the safety and protection of cultural relics."
- Concerns are compounded by the lack of access for architecture or heritage experts, given China's tight grip over the region. Lhasa and the rest of the Tibet Autonomous Region are closed until April to foreign visitors in what has become an annual lockdown due to the sensitive political anniversary of the 1959 March 10 Uprising and 2008 protests.
- Some Tibetan pilgrims have been sleeping on the ground in freezing temperatures outside the Jokhang every night since the fire, revealing the level of distress and concern about the fate of this most sacred site, while others carry out prostrations from 4am every day, according to reports from Lhasa.
- The seventh century Jokhang Temple, around which the city of Lhasa was built, is due to be discussed at the next meeting of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Bahrain in June. The world heritage conservation body is seeking information from the Chinese government about the extent of the damage.

When the fire broke out on February 17, dramatic footage of flames shooting from the golden roof of the temple was circulated widely, with Tibetans heard praying and weeping in the background. But Chinese authorities took several hours to confirm the fire, and then downplayed the incident. State media reports a few days later stated that the fire was quickly extinguished, that statues and relics were intact, and that there were no casualties.

A leaked internal document indicated that the authorities took around 30 minutes to respond to the fire, although it is in the heart of the central Barkhor area of Tibet's historic and cultural capital, and China told the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in December (2017) it has a 24-hour "fire and security brigade" stationed at the Jokhang.¹ In a report to the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in December (2017), the Chinese authorities specified that the Jokhang Temple has its own "fire brigade responsible for

¹ According to ICT research, there are five fire brigades stationed in the vicinity of the Jokhang, including at the Norbulingka and the Potala Palace. In a move that has been linked to the authorities' attempts to deter and respond to self-immolation protests, fire-extinguishers have been installed in temples and monasteries across Tibet in recent years.

firefighting and security ... with staff on duty 24 hours ... responsible for the safety and protection of cultural relics."²

The Jokhang (also known as the Tsuglakhang) Temple³ is of unique architectural, cultural and religious significance, and the wooden core of the main building, built by Newari craftsmen from the Kathmandu valley in the seventh century, has the highest value in heritage terms. This is particularly the case because apart from some contents of the Jowo Chapel, almost none of the original contents of the temple survived the Chinese Cultural Revolution. While Chinese official statements issued after the fire sought to provide reassurance that the cultural relics had not been damaged, some Tibetans have voiced fears about the possibility that the authorities may be patching up the core structure of the temple, the most important element, with cement - which experts on Tibet's heritage would regard as disastrous.

Matteo Mecacci, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: "The Jokhang Temple is of immeasurable significance to the Tibetan people as one of Buddhism's most sacred sites, and to the world for its cultural, architectural, and historical importance. It is as if one of our great churches, Notre Dame in Paris or St Peter's in Rome, caught fire, and the government sought to suppress newspaper coverage and efforts by international conservation experts to evaluate the damage and help restore the buildings. There must be full disclosure - ill-advised patch-up efforts to save face could be catastrophic for a building that has survived largely intact for 13 centuries. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee must press for the answers to legitimate questions about the Jokhang fire damage as a matter of urgency, and full access given to concerned parties such as international and Tibetan experts for independent verification of the status of the unique and precious architecture, and its statues and murals, particularly the Jowo Rinpoche statue."

Hours after images and footage of the blaze circulated worldwide on February 17, Tibetans were warned not to continue sending out video or images of the fire. Police issued an order threatening punishment for anyone caught distributing "rumours" that might assist "foreign hostile forces", according to various Tibetan sources.⁴ Even the most innocuous social media posts, including some urging people to pray for the Jokhang, were censored.⁵ In the meantime, misleading information was being circulated and channeled to Tibetans in exile, which was picked up by some news portals.⁶

In the absence of information and clarity from the Chinese authorities, images taken clandestinely inside the Jokhang do provide some reassurance about the survival of the temple as a whole, despite a fire that may have raged for around an hour in a building that has a timber frame. However, these pictures have also raised further questions about whether more extensive damage is being hidden by the Chinese

² December 1, 2017, <http://whc.unesco.org/document/165238>. The Jokhang Temple was granted World Heritage status in 2000.

³ The temple is known to Tibetans as the Tsuklakhang.

⁴ Academic Jeremy Brown from Simon Fraser University in Canada, who has studied the official handling of accidents in Maoist and post-Maoist China, explains that the CCP's definition of "sudden incidents" (túfāshìjiàn 突发事件) includes accidents, natural disasters, and protests, or political disturbances. In an interview with China Digital Times, Dr Brown said: "The Party has decided to put these three things together. [...] There's an automatic assumption by putting those things together that these are threats to the stability of the Communist Party, and so they need to be handled in the same way. Instead of being transparent, [...] the impulse is to cover it up. [...] You keep people from protesting, you keep them from linking up and organizing, and if you successfully do that, then that's 'good handling' of an accident. The word 'handling,' chǔlǐ 处, is what is done after an accident [...] It's a stand-in for 'make it go away,' basically." Jeremy Brown, 'Jeremy Brown: How the Party Handles Accidents', China Digital Times, August 3, 2017, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/08/interview-jeremy-brown-learning-lessons-maintaining-stability-accidents-disasters/>. "Accidents in today's China," Dr Brown wrote in a chapter of Perry Link and Richard P. Madsen's 2013 book "Restless China," "bring social tensions and anxieties to the fore. They heighten grievances about inequality and unfairness. They exacerbate feelings of insecurity and helplessness."

⁵ China Digital Times, 'Almost Total Suppression of Information' After Tibet Fire', <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2018/02/almost-total-suppression-information-tibet-temple-fire/>

⁶ Tibetologist Robbie Barnett documented in a series of microblogs how censorship, opacity, and mistrust had spread anxiety, confusion, and rumor following the Jokhang fire, from February 17 (2018) onwards: see his Twitter feed @RobbieBarnett

authorities. There is still no information about damage caused by smoke, water, and the chemicals used to extinguish the blaze, in addition to direct fire damage.

The official Chinese narrative about the Jokhang was set out in a state media report on February 21 (2018). Xinhua stated in this report that arson had been ruled out - experts have testified that there are numerous possibilities of natural causes - and that the Jowo statue and "all the registered 6,510 cultural relics and the main building were intact." The same report stated that the main golden roof "has been removed in case of collapse or reburning", and also said that the fire had broken out "on the second floor of the rear part of the sacred monastery at 6:40 [PM] Saturday evening (February 17)."⁷ A further Xinhua report in Chinese provided more detail, citing a monk at the Jokhang saying: "After the fire broke out, we all felt that the sky was going to fall down. We were particularly anxious."⁸

A leaked document by the Public Security Bureau that circulated online a few days after the fire stated that fire-fighters arrived at the Jokhang Temple at 7:07 PM on February 17. Earlier official reports had stated that the fire had begun at 18.40 PM, indicating that the fire raged for half an hour before it was tackled (the English-language Global Times even reported that the fire had begun at "around 6 PM").⁹ Videos show the blaze was still raging after sunset at 19:46.¹⁰ Addressed to fire brigades in every province, autonomous region and municipality, the document stated that: "Lhasa fire brigade received an emergency call at 7: 06 PM on February 17 stating that a fire broke out in Jokhang Temple. Thirty-seven fire engines and around 200 firefighters were sent to put out the fire. At 7:07 PM, firefighters arrived in the Jokhang Temple to put out the fire, and salvage and evacuate cultural relics. At 08:05 PM, the fire was put out."¹¹

The same document stated that it affected around 50 square meters,¹² which is bigger than any of the individual chapels in the temple.

The original Jokhang Temple, largely preserved until now, is a stone and mudbrick building with a timber frame interior.¹³ Footage from the east shows most, if not all, of the eastern end of the Jokhang totally

⁷ Xinhua in English, February 21, 2018.

⁸ Xinhua, 'Jokhang Temple fire ruled out the human factor: Buddha Shakyamuni intact', February 22, 2018. This report in Chinese revealed more detail than the English version, quoting several local Tibetans - including one vice mayor, one local cultural affairs bureau official, one fire brigade official, and a Jokhang monk.

⁹ In a report posted just before 11 pm on February 17, Global Times stated: "The incident took place at around 6 p.m. local time and the blaze has been put out." (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1089818.shtml>).

¹⁰ A short news bulletin on February 17, 2018, announced that Tibet Autonomous Region Party Secretary Wu Yingjie had "rushed to the scene" after the fire began at 18.40 (Lhasa time), Chinese state media, February 17, 2018, citing source as Tibet Daily: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2018-02-17/doc-ifyrrmye2398964.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

¹¹ A full translation into English was posted on Facebook on February 21 (2018) by https://www.facebook.com/gesar.gyalpo?hc_ref=ART5wWTDIcR_8iLSBOYNxs7nphNI4vHTK4vHfEufPxe7qWsqGq1044r4flq2yEsrHFI&fref=fb&pnref=story, following an original post by Tsering Wooser. The full title is: 'Notice on Learning Lessons from the Dazhaosi [Jokhang] Fire in Lhasa TAR & Effectively Strengthening Fire Prevention at Religious Sites, 2018 (30)', published by The Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China. The full translation is as follows:

'Notification of gaining a lesson from the fire accident in Jokhang Temple and strengthening the prevention of fire conflagrations
Fire brigades in every province, autonomous region and municipality,
Lhasa fire brigade received an emergency call at 7:06pm on Feb 17 that a fire broke out in Jokhang temple. 37 fire engines and around 200 firefighters were sent to put out the fire. At 7:07pm, firefighters arrived in the Jokhang temple to put out the fire, and salvage and evacuate cultural relics. At 08:05pm, the fire was put out. The area of the burned area was around 50 square meters, and there were no casualties. Jokhang temple is a Tibetan monastery, which was built by Songtsen Gampo. It has a history of more than 1,300 years. It is the oldest earth & wood building in Tibet. According to our preliminary investigation, the fire started in the main assembly hall and its roof of Jokhang. The cause and the damage of the fire are still under the investigation.'

¹² According to a microblog by Robbie Barnett, the figure of 50 square meters is frequently given as the area covered by fire - if a larger figure is given, fire-fighters and local authorities are liable to a different kind of obligation or responsibility.

¹³ Andre Alexander, 'The Lhasa Jokhang: is the world's oldest timber frame building in Tibet?' Web Journal, Vol. 1, N. 1, p. 123-154, ill., http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/media/download/Articolo_8_Alexander.pdf

engulfed on February 17. The interior wood would have burned quickly especially because it is so old and consequently dry, and from the duration and intensity of the fire, it seems likely that the fire may have consumed several or all the levels on the eastern end.

Images and footage taken clandestinely after the fire have continued to cast doubt on the official version. Matthew Akester, Tibet scholar and co-author of 'The Temples of Lhasa: Tibetan Buddhist Architecture from the 7th to the 21st Centuries',¹⁴ has scrutinized the photographs and footage of the fire and told ICT: "There is a lot of woodwork and open air in the first floor space above the Jowo, which could act as a convection passage if a fire broke out. Since we know from the video footage that the golden roof (east Gyapip) above the Jowo was ablaze, this is apparently what happened. There are also photos of the Jowo Chapel with its rear portion screened off by a yellow drape, and of fire damage to the Jowo's four-pillar canopied throne. It is possible that the Jowo statue itself survived with only minor damage, but the statues on the side and rear walls were likely badly damaged. There is no reason to doubt that the post-fire photos of the Jowo were taken in the chapel - the yellow drapes behind it are likely to indicate damage to the rear of the chapel only."¹⁵ Matthew Akester also studied images on social media that appeared to be taken on February 22 after the temple's re-opening,¹⁶ saying that it looked as though visitors were being allowed to see the important Jowo Rinpoche statue from 20ft away, but not to enter the chapel where it is housed.

An unattributed video and picture circulating on social media on February 19 were assumed to show the Jowo Rinpoche with no sign of damage, after the fire, but they showed different backgrounds.¹⁷ Tibetologist Robbie Barnett, who documented the drip-feeding of information from official sources and anonymous witness reports on his Twitter feed, also observed that while the column next to the Jowo is typically inlaid with precious stones, in the photo, it is bare, and the satellite photos were wrongly marked.¹⁸

Tibetan writer Tsering Woesser was among those who commented on the yellow draperies hung behind the Jowo statue on some images that circulated afterwards, tweeting on February 19: "After the fire of 17th, I wonder what's behind the yellow drapery behind the sacred Jowo...Traditionally the Jowo has never had such hangings. I've been to the Jokhang many times since March 1990 and haven't ever seen a veil around it like this."

A Tibet specialist researcher, who asked to remain anonymous and who consulted a professional firefighter about the footage, agreed that it was likely the fire was contained to the eastern third of the building, for most of the main roof and other gilded roofs remained intact in all footage, including that filmed late in the evening when the fire looked under control. Due to the size of the structure, firefighters may have been able to fight the fire from within the building wearing self-contained breathing apparatus and direct hoses at the blaze from the western end of the central hall. The researcher said: "If they were on the scene quickly enough, they may have been able to contain the fire to the upper floors, however

¹⁴ With Andre Alexander. Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2005.

¹⁵ Matthew Akester explained further: "The Jowo chapel has a very high ceiling which goes up to the second floor, so the first floor area is open space. The second floor or rooftop chapel, directly under the golden roof (Gyapip) that we saw burning, was usually either empty or did not contain anything of great value. On the south side of the open space at first floor level there was once a gallery space (not a discreet chapel) called Shéré Lhakhang, where one could look down on the Jowo statue. This area was apparently damaged in the Mao era, and was not restored during the 1980s rehabilitation of the temple, but left boarded up with plywood, and inaccessible to visitors. It contained traces of apparently 12th century murals that have been photographed and published. It is apparently this area that was rendered in the Xinhua statement as 'ventilation room'."

¹⁶ After its re-opening the day after the fire, the Jokhang temple was closed until February 22, according to a report by the Tibetan language service of Radio Free Radio Free Asia, 'Tibet's Jokhang Temple Closes For Three Days, Raising Concerns Over Damage', February 22, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/concerns-02202018165102.html>

¹⁷ The link to the video is at: <https://www.facebook.com/branis.katic/videos/1859430144069472/?%20%E2%80%A6>

¹⁸ Also see LA Times, 'A fire may have damaged precious relics at Tibet's holiest temple. China says no - but experts aren't so sure', by Jonathan Kaiman, February 22, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-china-temple-fire-20180222-story.html>

water damage to the floors below would surely have been significant, and damage to portable objects would have been incurred."

The same researcher said: "If the Chinese reports are accurate, the fire started on the second floor, where the area above the Jowo Chapel is located, so one would expect damage to that floor and areas in the path of flames upward to be most significant. Typically, when fires break out, those nearby attempt to rescue valuables from buildings. One hopes that people were in the building or nearby and succeeded in rescuing the Jowo and some other relics. The outer walls of the building are approximately 44 meters in length, so depending on where exactly the fire started and how quickly it spread, quick-thinking individuals could have carried the Jowo to safety."

It has been speculated that the fire was caused by an electrical problem, and one account of conditions in the building after the fire noted sticky substances that damaged surfaces, possibly caused by a chemical used in fighting the fire. If the account was correct, the stickiness and damage was likely caused by melting and other heat damage and possibly by particulates from the smoke.¹⁹

The footage from the south and east also appears to show a structure ablaze to the immediate east of the Jokhang, unless the eastern exterior wall of the Jokhang blew out and the flames are emanating from that. From the drawings of Tibetan architectural expert, the late Andre Alexander, the Nangkor (circumambulation route around the Jokhang) appears to only be about 10 meters wide, so a structure to the east could have been involved.

Writing about the Jokhang's importance, Andre Alexander said: "Its foundation falls in the dynamic period of the first half of the seventh century AD that saw the consolidation of the Tibetan empire and the earliest documented formation of Tibetan culture and society, as expressed through the introduction of Buddhism, the creation of written script based on Indian scripts and the establishment of a law code. In the Tibetan cultural and religious tradition, the Jokhang Temple's importance has been continuously celebrated soon after its foundation. The temple also gave name and *raison d'etre* to the city of Lhasa (Place of the Gods)."²⁰

Tsering Woeser posted on February 28 on social media that she had been told that despite "the bone-chilling cold" of the nights in the first month of the Tibetan New Year (Losar), "(I) was told that believers have been doing prostrations day and night here since the fire, even sleeping on the ground here. [...] It is as the words from the song called 'I See the Flames': "Under the mountains, there are the eyes of the fog, carefully guarding our souls..."²¹

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). It has since asked the Chinese government for more information, following the fire.

¹⁹ The firefighter observed that it was possible that a product unknown elsewhere was used, but that seemed unlikely given that products and practices are fairly standard worldwide. He elaborated that any product that would cause damage to surfaces would also cause damage to the tanks and lines of firetrucks, so specialized trucks are required for any liquid that is corrosive, such as seawater, and it made no sense to use products that would cause unnecessary damage. He also explained that if fire retardants were used, they are only sticky in concentrate form, resembling liquid dish soap bubbles when mixed with water and applied to fires and, like dish soap, don't cause damage to surfaces.

²⁰ Andre Alexander, 'The Lhasa Jokhang: is the world's oldest timber frame building in Tibet?' Web Journal, Vol. 1, N. 1, p. 123-154, ill., http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/media/download/Articolo_8_Alexander.pdf

²¹ Translation into English from the Chinese by ICT.