



## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

### Coronavirus response in Tibet: arrests, crackdown, religious repression

Read online: <https://savetibet.org/coronavirus-response-in-tibet-arrests-crackdown-religious-repression>

February 13, 2020

- China has responded to the spread of coronavirus to Tibet by cracking down on people who post information online about the deadly illness, including one man who was detained by police simply for encouraging his contacts to recite prayers to ward off infection.
- Chinese authorities also announced the cancellation of public religious festivals and prayer ceremonies for “Losar,” the Tibetan New Year, which begins Feb. 24.
- In the wake of the outbreak, the Chinese government has activated its network of military and Chinese Community Party cadres to spread propaganda about protecting “stability”—a euphemism for the suppression of free speech and the enforcement of compliance with CCP policies.
- Despite the spread of the virus, China’s leadership has chosen to move ahead with a new campaign in Tibet described as sending a “million police to 10 million homes.” The intention is to ensure “grass roots” integration of security forces in local communities. The campaign began in January and will continue throughout the year.
- In contrast to the Chinese government’s heavy-handed response, the Tibetan people have reacted to the outbreak of coronavirus with compassion. Monasteries have donated funds for the purchase of facemasks and goggles, and Tibetans lit butter lamps in honor of the Chinese whistleblower who warned about the virus and subsequently died from it.

### Coronavirus in Tibetan areas

According to available information, infections of coronavirus—which the World Health Organization now labels as COVID-19—in Tibetan areas were as follows as of Feb.13, 2020:

- Tibet Autonomous Region: One confirmed case, later announced as cured on Feb. 12.
- Qinghai: 18 confirmed cases, with 11 reported to have been cured.
- Sichuan: 37 cases in Kardze (Chinese: Ganzi) prefecture, with three reportedly cured. Of the 37, 32 were in Tawu (Daofu), two in Sertha (Seda), two in Dartsedo (Kangding) and one in Dabpa (Daocheng). There was also one case in Ngaba (Aba).
- Gansu: Seven cases in Kanlho (Gannan) with one reportedly cured.
- Yunnan: Dechen Prefecture said it has zero cases.

There is no accurate information on how many of the infected individuals are Tibetan, although there are reports that Tibetans were among the infected in Kardze.

## Timing

The Chinese government's repressive response to the coronavirus outbreak comes at an already sensitive time in Tibet.

Next week is “Losar,” the Tibetan New Year. To prevent the spread of the illness, Chinese authorities have announced the cancellation of public religious festivals and prayer ceremonies related to the holiday.

In addition, across Tibet, most religious sites have been asked to cancel group gatherings. In Qinghai province, authorities announced the cancellation of all group religious activities and also asked the religious community not to “believe in rumors, do not spread rumors.”

While the threat of coronavirus is no doubt a concern, the Chinese government has used every excuse in the past to stop Tibetans from taking part in their traditional religious and cultural celebrations.

The arrival of coronavirus in Tibet also comes weeks before the anniversary of the March 10 Uprising in 1959, as well as the mass protests in Tibet on the same date in 2008. Every year since 2008, the Tibet Autonomous Region has been closed to tourists for at least one month around this time, with the closure in 2019 lasting from January 30 until April 1.

After the first confirmed case of coronavirus in Lhasa, TAR officials asked people not to come to the region until the epidemic was under control, with one expert reasoning that patients infected by the novel coronavirus will suffer from much more severe symptoms in Tibet on account of the low level of oxygen in the air.

## Imprisoned for spreading rumors—or offering prayers

In Tibet and elsewhere, Chinese authorities have warned of severe consequences of several years in prison for anyone who circulates “rumors” about coronavirus. The TAR Internet Information Office issued a seven-point circular on online posting. Point 1 forbid people from posting information “that endangers national security, undermines national unity, subverts state power, or overturns the socialist system, or incites ethnic hatred, ethnic discrimination, and undermines national unity by means of rumors and incitement to libel”. Point 2 said, “It is strictly forbidden to spread statements that attack the party’s religious policies on the information network, promote religious extremism and separatist ideas, incite the masses to dissatisfaction with the party and the government, organize mass incidents in series, and use the network to spread information about cults and feudal superstitions.”

In Tibet Commercial Daily, a state media outlet, officials said that: “At this time, malicious fabrication and spread of rumors will be severely punished.”

The same newspaper said that on January 29, a netizen in Tibet named “Zhou” posted a statement saying that “Ngari [Chinese: Ali] has one case [of the virus]” and that “No one in this pure land is safe.” For these actions, Zhou was punished with eight days of detention.

Two users of WeChat, a popular social media platform, in Chentsa (Chinese: Jianzha) county in Malho, Qinghai province were investigated and found guilty of spreading a rumor about someone in the area having been infected with coronavirus, according to a report in Tibetan by the website China Tibetan Netcom. One of them was given five days in detention and the other was fined RMB 500.

According to Radio Free Asia, a man named Tse in Tengchen (Dingqing) County was one of seven detained in Chamdo (Changdu) for posting a message on WeChat asking people to recite a particular prayer 10 times and send the request on to 10 other people to guard against infection.

RFA quoted a state media outlet as saying that the man was punished with a term of administrative detention of seven days.

RFA also reported that among the other six people detained was a man from Chamdo's Gonjo (Gongjue) county named Chen, who posted a comment online on Jan. 29 saying that people from mainland China were secretly arriving in the county. The man was accused of "causing panic among Chamdo netizens" by state media outlet the People's Daily, which reported that security officers immediately "clarified the situation," took Chen into custody and sentenced him to 10 days' detention and a fine of 500 yuan (about US \$72).

## Putting the Party before health

In the campaign against the virus, Chinese propaganda in Tibet has highlighted the role of police and security enforcement officers more than that of medical personnel who are on the frontline of the epidemic. A report in Tibet Daily on Feb. 13 said Chinese Communist Party organizations and members at different levels displayed "courage in moving forward" that equated the "size of the problems and dangers" they had to confront in their effort to help the people. That news report had the headline: "Tibet Region's Party cadres shoulder heavy responsibility and establish a firm fortress to control and prevent the epidemic."

Chinese authorities have used their existing "grid management" network of thousands of CCP cadres in Tibet to enforce control and quarantine measures, taking every opportunity to ensure praise for the Communist Party.

In Shigatse (Rikaze) in the TAR, a "commando" team of 865 party cadres pledged their loyalty to the fight "for the Party and the people" under the red flag. Tibet Daily stated that the party cadres were, "Fighting for Communism for life, ready to sacrifice everything for the Party and the people."

## Emphasis on stability maintenance and compliance

Chinese officials have also used the campaign against the epidemic to focus on the need for stability maintenance. Ding Yexian, executive deputy party secretary of the TAR, visited the monasteries of Drepung, Sera, Ramoche and Jokhang in Lhasa last week to review the situation. In his remarks he told monastic authorities that the TAR was at a critical stage in the prevention of the epidemic and also at a critical stage in stability maintenance.

According to state media, Ding said at a meeting about combatting the virus that: "We must lay a solid foundation to leverage the role of grassroots party cadres and organizations as battle fortresses and vanguards to fight against social stability maintenance and coronavirus with the Party flag raised high in the frontlines of the struggle. We should work on prevention and control work of coronavirus and social stability maintenance as a whole, and jointly prevent and control the ongoing coronavirus and stability risk to build a strong iron wall of social stability maintenance and fight against the coronavirus epidemic in Tibet."

Even as the coronavirus outbreak ravages the country, the CCP's focus on Tibet's border, which is regarded as crucial for the "stability" of all of China, has been strengthened. The Tibet Military Region recently held its first award ceremony for "model border stabilization." A ceremony on maintaining an "iron faith" in the government's mission to secure the borders was broadcast on Jan. 25 to tens of thousands of troops across the TAR, with soldiers singing a "battle song" indicating "the heroic spirit of the military troops in the snow-land."

Despite the major problem of coronavirus, Tibet Daily on Jan. 24 reported that officials went ahead with a new campaign described as a “million police entering 10 million homes,” which includes “visiting the people, resolving people’s concerns, resolving conflicts, preventing risks, investigating problems and controlling chaos.”

An example of the integration authorities seek between civilians and the security apparatus and military, the new campaign involves organizing “all grassroots units of the ... police into the community, into the pastoral areas, into the scenic areas, into the temples” ensuring that they are in “close contact” “with the masses.”

## Tibetans’ empathy for coronavirus victims

Despite the Chinese government using coronavirus to further its crackdown on Tibetans’ freedoms, Tibetans themselves have responded to the outbreak with compassion and concern.

Photos have been circulating on social media about donations by several Tibetan monasteries to Coronavirus prevention initiatives. For example, Kumbum monastery donated 1 million yuan to Wuhan, the city where the outbreak began, to help with the purchase of necessary items like facemasks and goggles. Similarly, there were reports of Tibetan communities contributing funds, too.

Tibetans also posted images on social media of butter lamps they lit in memory of Chinese whistleblower Li Wenliang, who tried to warn people about the outbreak before it began but was arrested and punished by authorities for doing so.

Li, 34, eventually died from the illness, prompting criticism of the government from people across China.



International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) | 1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC 20036 | United States of America  
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | [info@savetibet.org](mailto:info@savetibet.org)

ICT Europe  
Funenpark 1D | 1018 AK  
Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265  
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266  
[icteurope@savetibet.nl](mailto:icteurope@savetibet.nl)

ICT Deutschland e.V.  
Schönhauser Allee 163 | 10435  
Berlin, Germany  
Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086  
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087  
[info@savetibet.de](mailto:info@savetibet.de)

ICT Brussels  
11, rue de la linière | 1060  
Brussels, Belgium  
Phone: +32 (0)2 609 44 10  
Fax: +32 (0)2 609 44 32  
[info@save-tibet.eu](mailto:info@save-tibet.eu)