



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Lhasa authorities admit mishandling COVID outbreak, silence Tibetan outrage

<https://savetibet.org/lhasa-authorities-admit-mishandling-covid-outbreak>

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**“If you are incompetent, you should let them go.
Even if we die, we will die in our own homes.”**

In a rare admission to the public, the municipal government of Lhasa City on Saturday, Sept. 17, admitted mishandling the COVID-19 outbreak in Tibet’s capital since Aug 7. Admitting the hardships caused to the public and the failure to provide services, the [statement](#), however, stopped short of admitting the failure of the Zero-COVID policy formulated by the Chinese Communist Party leadership in Beijing. On the contrary, “Tibet Autonomous Region” (TAR) Party Secretary Wang Junzheng [declared](#) during the TAR CCP standing committee meeting on the morning of Sept. 19 that there would be no change in the Zero-COVID policy. The statement came alongside a stepping up of censorship and clamping down on those who openly expressed their grievances and pleas.

Besides issuing this apologetic statement, apparently to assuage public anger, the Chinese authorities announced no meaningful remedial measures concerning public health to alleviate the current dire COVID situation in Lhasa or the Tibetan areas in and outside the TAR. The TAR spans most of western Tibet, a historically independent country that China has illegally occupied for over 60 years.

During the press conference organized by the Lhasa municipal government, Damdul (Chinese: Zhandui), who holds concurrent positions as a Vice-Mayor of the city and a standing committee member of the city’s CCP, admitted the failure of the municipal government and the hardships to the public due to the city government’s shortcomings and weaknesses. Damdul expressed remorse for the lack of COVID-19 testing capacity, delayed and inaccurate test results, inadequate garbage removal and cleaning services, cross-infections, inefficient staff and logistical inefficiency due to the rushed implementation of measures against the outbreak of COVID-19.

Instead of admitting the overall policy failure, the Lhasa Vice-Mayor criticized the health and lower-rank government workers as the cause of hardships to the public. At the same time, it is notable that Communist Party officials have not issued an apology on behalf of the party so far, although the party and its top leadership are responsible for prescribing the Zero-COVID policy all over China and in Tibet and are thus accountable for any policy failure. Although Damdul holds concurrent Lhasa CCP and government positions, his public statement was issued on behalf of the municipal government during the Lhasa government press conference and not on behalf of the party. Moreover, the statement appeared to be tactical in having a powerless Tibetan official in the chain of command apologize rather than the Chinese Party officials in Tibet.

The International Campaign for Tibet notes that the public statement has come straight after Chinese authorities started to step up their censorship machinery to remove critical postings by Tibetans on Chinese social media platforms like Weibo, Douyin (Chinese short video platform), WeChat and other information communication channels with state oversight. Chinese authorities launched an internet rectification drive starting between Sept 15-18 to trace and clamp down on the individuals who posted criticisms and challenged the authorities.

A day after the Lhasa municipal government issued the public statement, the Lhasa Public Security Bureau issued a [public notice](#) on Sept. 18 threatening investigation and punishment “for those who maliciously create, spread rumors, and incite illegal gatherings to cause trouble.” For example, the bureau announced administrative punishment of three netizens, one each from Lhasa City’s Chengguan district and Meldrogongkar county, and Shethongmon (Chinese: Xaitongmoin) county in Shigatse prefectural level city. For their posts on Chinese social media Weibo and Douyin, the three were charged with “spreading epidemic related rumors to confuse the public. Incit[ing] opposition and gatherings to cause trouble and endanger social and public security, disrupting the work order of epidemic prevention and control, causing bad social impact.”

The bureau in a follow-up [public notice](#) on Sept. 20 stated that 786 people in 471 cases have been punished according to the law of the People’s Republic of China on Penalties for Administration of Public Security. They were charged with creating obstacles to epidemic prevention and control work. For example, a man was punished for spreading a COVID “rumor” on a voice chat group on Sept 7. Damshung (Damxung) county public security bureau issued him a detention penalty according to the law on penalties for administration of public security.

Public outrage

Since the COVID outbreak in Tibet began Aug. 7, both Tibetans and Chinese tourists, migrants and settlers have expressed their grievances, pleas and criticisms of the official Zero-COVID policy and the official measures in particular that have caused enormous hardship to the public. There have been multiple posts on Chinese social media (subsequently taken down) highlighting that due to the lockdown continuing for more than a month and a half, people have had no income for a long time, and the pressure of life is high. The sheer scale of public outrage, most prominently from Lhasa, on Chinese social media, particularly on Douyin, apparently led the municipal government of Lhasa to issue its public statement to assuage the Lhasa public anger. Although Tibetans from other parts of Tibet also posted their outrage on Chinese social media, their posts did not match the scale of outrage posted from urban Lhasa.

Tibetan outrage on Chinese social media does not go unheeded, although the authorities’ response depends on what the scale of public outrage is. With the stepping up of censorship and deletion of critical posts, along with government media briefings since Sept. 16, Tibetan posts criticizing the authorities on Chinese social media have dropped sharply, although there is no improvement of the situation on the ground.

With the critics silenced, China’s external propaganda on Tibet portrays the situation as improving with a low number of new infections. [The propaganda](#) is expected to run at least till the end of the 20th Party Congress in mid-October. The figures for COVID infections in Tibet have been severely underreported since the beginning of the outbreak. While the state media outlets report tens of COVID cases in the TAR, Tibetans on the ground in isolation centers say hundreds and thousands of

Tibetans were being taken in buses to the isolation centers. Sharing his thoughts on the projection of Tibet in Chinese media, veteran China observer Bill Bishop in his popular [Sinocism](#) newsletter wrote recently:

“Official media say the situation in Lhasa is improving, I suggest a healthy dose of skepticism about all reports of outbreaks between now and the end of the Party Congress, as the censors are ramping up to 11 to ensure a positive energy environment to welcome the victory of the 20th Party Congress. As I wrote last week, while we have decent visibility into outbreaks and control measures in major cities like Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen there are many places in the PRC where we have very little idea what is really going on.”

Tibetans express anger and criticism

The harsh and hasty implementation of the centrally developed Zero-COVID policy has caused severe hardship to Tibetans. An end to the hardships is not in sight, although varying degrees of lockdowns have been implemented since the outbreak on Aug. 7. The measures introduced to curb the outbreak have apparently exacerbated community transmission of the virus instead of preventing it, caused a shortage of food despite official assurances of uninterrupted supply and led to food price inflation, unhygienic food or no food supply at isolation centers and the unavailability of medical staffers, while the authorities have been unresponsive and ill-communicating.

The public anger vented on Chinese social media platforms cover a range of grievances and hardships caused by the Zero-COVID policy. It is notable that Tibetans have been very cautious and skillful in putting forward their grievances. Often the voices begin with praise and sycophancy to the CCP, as every Tibetan knows that criticism of the Party means crossing a red line that will result in persecution and most likely detention, regardless of their suffering and hardship or the issue at hand.

Three issues stand out prominently in the social postings, as well as in voices heard on the ground. Tibetans complain of indiscriminate detention of people in isolation centers irrespective of their infection status, the lack of availability of hygiene of food in isolation centers, being stranded in lockdowns with depleted savings due to food price inflation and facing indifferent local officials who issue threats to save their job or are totally exasperated at their indifferent higher ups in the command chain.

It should be noted that the primary concern is the indiscriminate detention of people in isolation centers irrespective of whether their health code status is red or green. Tibetans have heavily criticized the Chinese COVID strategy to round up and send everyone into state-mandated isolation centers without consideration of their infection status. As one Tibetan succinctly comments, “If those with red [health code] status are being taken away, it can be understood. But if everyone is being taken away, what is that? Those with green [health code] status later also turn red. How do you explain that? Is it to prevent infection or to infect everyone? How do you explain that? We don’t understand that. You should explain that to us.”

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lChJhKFI6I>]

In another comment posted on Sept. 14, a woman speaking in Tibetan shares that she was sent to a makeshift isolation hospital on Sept. 9 despite being infection-free and having a green (health code) status. She further shares that she and some others have been able to avoid getting infected and

maintained their green status despite being in the isolation center for six days by staying in a corner and avoiding those infected. But they are still being held in the isolation center despite their repeated pleas for permission to return home. After calling the authorities day in and day out, one official admitted that they had been erroneously sent to the isolation site but expressed helplessness in bringing them out.

The second prominent concern was over food being unavailable or stale and unhygienic at isolation centers. Tibetans complained of the lack of food in some isolation centers or rotten and moldy food being given where it is provided. Sharing her sympathy to the infected people, a Tibetan woman compares the food at isolation centers to “pig’s food.”

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mifyj5T67I0>]

A woman in isolation points her phone camera at the leftover food that the workers bring to them.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbsICIDjvtk>]

Another woman pans her phone camera to a makeshift kitchen near the garbage disposal area where she points out that the vegetables and meat are not washed and utterly unhygienic.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HtvDI6h3Jc0>]

An elderly woman speaking in Tibetan shares with the viewers the condition of her isolation location. She describes the location as an unfinished construction site with cement walls and with no doors where tens of people are being isolated on all floors. She shows the kitchen with a stove, a kettle, a bag of roasted barley flour and some packaged food as supplies for all of them. She also shows the single toilet for all of them. Pointing to a door, she says they can go out for a walk but wonders how they are supposed to do that with nothing sufficient to eat.

Another prominent concern shared by the complainants was being stranded in lockdowns with depleting savings due to food price inflation and unequal distribution of food subsidies. A migrant Tibetan woman in Lhasa running a small business shared that “whatever little [fund] has been saved is now running out. When shopping for vegetables, the price of vegetables has shot up making it unaffordable. The price has been soaring, but I have been putting up with it and purchasing the vegetables with whatever I have. Now my fund is running out. Not only did I eat but also shared with other needy ones around me. Sharing is what is needed to be done ... We are not saying we want to go home out of sheer joy but because food has run out and no savings are left in our hand. In what is said in *Douyin*, it appears that a lot of [subsidy] is being given out but we don’t get anything. We are helpless.”

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8lIBxooxA4g>]

A further important concern shared by complainants reveals the indifference and exasperation shared by local officials over the indifference of their superiors in the command chain. The migrant Tibetan woman in Lhasa in her Douyin post also shares that, “When I call the authority in my home county [about permission to come back home], they tell me not to come saying they are helpless as they must follow instructions from above. They say it concerns their food bowl [livelihood]. They say if I come back, it will affect my child’s schooling. Since I am lagging [in the society] as I don’t have education, I won’t let my child also to lag. Anybody will understand that. I dare not move worrying that my child’s university opportunity [in the future] would be affected.”

[Audio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ioLC4H9sCYM>]

In an audio exchange between a Chinese man and an epidemic worker in Lhasa, the Chinese man tells the worker to inform the higher-level authority that they have run short of food, the quarantine rule to be lifted and their location of quarantine becoming unhygienic. The government employee replies that it is pointless to talk to him as there are only 20 of them for 20,000 people and is fed up with working so hard. He says that the higher-up mayor and the party secretary are useless and pass down the responsibility. The worker advises the caller to share his opinion with the city government instead of him. The worker tells the man that they had to pay out of their own pocket as the higher-ups ignore their requests for sanitary supplies and cleaners. The worker says they are paid only 3,000 yuan monthly but complained about being paid tens of thousands. They aren't afraid anymore and say the higher-up leaders are useless.

Voices of Tibetans

The outpouring of public grievances, complaints and pleas on Chinese social media platforms was overwhelming before the Chinese authorities stepped up censorship. Select posts in both Tibetan and Chinese have been transcribed and translated in English below:

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MH6ULfGCXb4>]

What I am speaking today is not on behalf of myself only. There are different kinds of people who speak up. Some speak openly. Some stay a little mute. Some speak for one's own self-interest. Some speak collectively. I am not speaking for myself only. If the authorities are watching this [video clip], we are not revolting against you. Please separate those who do not have this disease. Please let them go to their respective places. Wherever we must return, whether to our county or the township, we will obey you the authorities and go straight to our places to quarantine.

We understand that you are in a difficult position as you must consider the many characteristics of the public. We absolutely are not a revolting people. If we are revolters, a revolt would have already taken place recently but we have been waiting and obeying the authorities. But there is no improvement in the situation of the disease [COVID]. We don't draw salary from the state. We earn our livelihood according to our own capabilities. Whatever little [fund] has been saved is now running out. When shopping for vegetables, the price of vegetables has shot up making it unaffordable. The price has been soaring, but I have been putting up with it and purchasing the vegetables with whatever I have. Now my fund is running out. Not only did I eat but also shared with other needy ones around me. Sharing is what is needed to be done. For one it is accumulating merit [for the next life]. Secondly, since the country is undergoing this, it needs to be done as we are all people in the same country. We all need to pool in. Unity is what both the leaders above and the public below say first from the mouth. I have been doing that although I don't have education. Now I am stressed out.

When I call the authority in my home county [about permission to come back home], they tell me not to come saying they are helpless as they must follow instructions from above. They say it concerns their food bowl [livelihood]. They say if I come back, it will affect my child's schooling. Since I am lagging [in the society] as I don't have education, I won't let my child also to lag. Anybody will understand that. I dare not move worrying that my child's university opportunity [in the future] would be affected. If [I am] in [my] village, there would be at least a dry *Khapse* [deep fried Tibetan cookie] to eat. Now here living on rent in someone else's house struggling to make

ends meet, I don't have even [Khapse] to eat. If I go to purchase something, the price is so high that my savings run out. When hungry, I must come outside. What else must I do?

I am healthy right now. A lot of *Fancang* [Chinese: make-shift hospitals with hundreds of beds for isolation] have been built and permission [for us] to go back to one's own home is not given. Permission is denied even when assurance is given for self-isolation in one's home. It seems like [they] are intentionally making us get infected. It's only a matter of time that I too will end up there [in a *Fancang*] when my health code status shows red. I am not the only one talking about this. Everyone is talking the same in all voice chat groups saying that [they] are waiting for the remaining people to get infected and their health code to turn red. If we are allowed to go home and do self-isolation, those with and without infection can be separated instead of keeping everyone together whether infected or not. It is said that the vegetable vendors have infection but when hungry one must go to the vegetable vendors. Isn't that like waiting intentionally for the infection to pass on? I might seem loudmouth, but I am speaking out as I am helpless. We are not saying we want to go home out of sheer joy but because food has run out and no savings is left in our hand. In what is said in *Douyin*, it appears that a lot of [subsidy] is being given out but we don't get anything. We are helpless.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxKSkHli0bA>]

Khamsang [Tibetan: good health to you!] Many people have landed in the *Fancang* due to this disease. In *Fancang*, they give rotten food. What are you doing? You shouldn't do this. You shouldn't do this. Don't you feel any sympathy for them? They are not prisoners. They are ill but you give them rotten food. Don't you have any sympathy? If you are not competent, you shouldn't be taking them away. Just leave them in their homes. Even if they die, they will die in their own home. If you take them away, you should give them medicine. The ill need medicine and food. But they are treated like prisoners. Even in prison, food must not be this bad. Don't you feel sympathy?

When we saw the video clips last night, we felt so sorry for them. But you will say *Zuohao Ziji* [Chinese: "sit properly"]. We can't sit properly. We are humans. We can't sit properly. For the moment, my family is staying inside the house. We have not contracted this disease. Sooner or later, we too will land in a *Fancang*. Are we supposed to eat that food? Who is managing all this? Don't you feel sorry in giving them that kind of food? In there [isolation location], there are children, elderly, and some elders already have diseases other than this disease [COVID]. Don't you feel sympathy for them? Don't give them that kind of food. If you are incompetent, you should let them go. Even if we die, we will die in our own homes.

If you have nothing to give, give them *Tsampa* [Tibetan: Tibetan staple food of ground up, roasted barley flour]. We are Tibetans. We eat *Tsampa*. All of us eat *Tsampa*. Even the Chinese will eat *Tsampa*. If given a choice between that food and *Tsampa*, the Chinese will choose *Tsampa*. Please don't give them that kind of food. When we see it, we feel very sorry for them. What kind of treatment is that? During such a critical time, is this how you treat the ill? You can see it yourself what is happening on the *Shiping* [Chinese: video clips]. They are being given moldy food. Moldy food! They will fall sick, don't you know that? You claim you are *Kexue* [Chinese: scientific]. If you are scientific don't you know that moldy food make humans sick? How could you treat them so badly? Don't you feel sympathy to them? Please [with folded hands], let them go or give them *Tsampa*. Don't give them that food. We feel sorry for them. All you give them is food like a pig's food. What do you think you have achieved by taking them all away?

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8SqJwewjal>]

Good morning to all, I have a small appeal to make. This year, as all of you very well know, the epidemic has swept across our land of snow. The food prices have soared. We also can't go out much. All of you know that very well. The offices directly related to the public are the village

residential committees and the subcommittees. Therefore, if the subcommittees and the village residential committees have some funds, it would be very helpful to distribute those to the public this year. That's my opinion.

Every year, all we hear is that the fund is in the accounts. But there is no one explaining how much is there in the accounts. If the village government office, generally speaking, could give the public some explanation, the public would be satisfied and would love their leaders. As you [the authorities] do not give any explanation, doubts and suspicions creep into the public mind. Therefore, if you have some funds which could be distributed this year, it would be very helpful. But you say it cannot be distributed. If the higher authorities could give approval to distribute the fund through a special policy in this critical time, it would be very helpful. This is my, Tsewang Rinzin's, appeal. Please!

The epidemic has wrecked the community. Therefore, be responsible in addressing the public pleas and overcome the epidemic. With these in my mind, I felt compelled to speak this morning. Give my opinion a thought if there is value in it. You are the authority because you are educated. Without education you won't be in authority. But don't get angry easily. When someone speaks up to you, you [the authorities] get very angry and give threats to the person. Don't do that at all.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sFfl0T7uaco>]

Hello to all. Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus, there is great fear in Lhasa city. Epidemic can occur. It is a natural obstacle. As it comes, it will also go away if we are cautious in the prevention measures. But in Lhasa, everyone irrespective of red or green [health code] status is being sent to the isolation centers. Why is this happening? Let's say that if the [health code] is red, it is justified to send people to an isolation center to prevent spread and we too will cooperate. But when everyone is being sent [to the isolation center] without sorting, what is that? What is the reason? The authorities must explain that to us farming and nomadic community. This is not to create obstacle to your work but asking for an explanation. Explain us that "for this prevention, this measure has been taken". Explain it clearly to us farming and nomadic community. It is not good if you can't do that. How do you explain that? If those with red [health code] are being taken away, it can be understood. But if everyone is being taken away, what is that? Those with green [health code] later also turn red. How do you explain that? Is it to prevent infection or to infect everyone? How do you explain that? We don't understand that. You should explain that to us. This is my first point. My second point is on food. First you take everyone irrespective of red or green [health code status], but maybe because of fund shortage, they are given rotten and moldy food. You would know that this would bring all sorts of diseases in a human being. Moreover, there are elderlies and children in there, wouldn't you feel sympathy for them? It is something to feel sorry about. When we see our people eating that kind of food, our heart ache. This is sad. These are my two points. Thank you. Provide a good explanation. My third point is towards my fellow Tibetans. We Tibetans have become a joke. Under such a circumstance, what we can do is to be harmonious internally. If we criticize and oppose each other, their pride and power will grow bigger.

Select video clips giving a glimpse of the intensity of COVID outbreak hardship below:

[Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAU-Ueu_LQY]

Hundreds being sent to a quarantine center.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uF7t86vaqfY>]

Families being led to a schoolgirl's dormitory turned quarantine site.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBTUmwvjNTs>]

Inside a mass quarantine center.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtGJREKzQAA>]

A woman and a baby strapped on her back being sprayed with disinfectant by COVID workers.

[Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt8DDVJBlI0>]

An emotional Tibetan health worker cautiously expresses her despair of having to keep afloat the spirit of the patients sent to a quarantine center while the patients in the city are being provided leftover and moldy food on top of all the hardships they endure. She urges the leaders to separate the healthy from the infected in the quarantine centers.

[Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEYX_Yd35n4]

Amidst swears, a distressed father expresses his anguish of having his ill children (under-1 and a 6-year-old) being separated from him in the quarantine center. He says that the government may come to pick his dead body but won't separate him from his children. He blames the rotten and corrupt government for sending him and his family to the quarantine center despite being healthy.



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