



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

Estimate: COVID deaths of Tibetan elders may exceed 220,000

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Over 220,000 Tibetans age 60 and above may die during the current COVID-19 surge in China, according to an estimate by the International Campaign for Tibet based on demographic data and health studies.

A new report from ICT uses studies from Japan and Brazil, as well as on-the-ground accounts from Tibetans and data from China's census, to estimate the death toll in Tibet, which China leaves out of its official COVID reporting.

While several models project the number of COVID infections and deaths in China since it abandoned its "zero-COVID" strategy on Dec. 7, this is the first known attempt to estimate the deaths in Tibet.

ICT's report also features first-hand accounts from Tibetans witnessing an unprecedented number of corpses brought to sky burial sites and cremation grounds in their homeland. One Tibetan says, "There's a shortage of vultures for the disposal of bodies."

"The abrupt end of the zero-COVID policy has had disastrous effects in Tibet, but China's lack of transparency and access, as well as its discriminatory treatment of Tibetans, have made it difficult to estimate the full extent of the horrors there," ICT said. "Tibetans are living a nightmare and facing an unimaginable death toll. The Chinese government's mismanagement of this crisis is endangering lives not only in Tibet, but in China and the entire world."

Fatality estimate

ICT's report uses China's 2020 census data as a baseline and arrives at its estimates through reasoning, logical deduction and extrapolations from available analytical studies.

According to the census, there are 692,911 Tibetans age 60 and older, including 82,672 who are 80 and above.

A study in Japan and acknowledgement by China's National Health Commission show that the fatality risk is highest for those 80 and above. Additionally, studies in Brazil show that the effectiveness of two doses of Chinese vaccines is very low for those in that age group. Vaccine effectiveness wanes with time.

According to sources, elder Tibetans were excluded from a third-dose vaccination campaign that began last year.

Until a current and very large sample-size vaccine efficiency study of Chinese vaccines is conducted independently, the studies conducted in Brazil stand as the best proxy to estimate the number of deaths of Tibetan elders.

ICT therefore estimates that 221,218 Tibetans age 60 and above may die in the current COVID crisis in Tibet. If case fatality rate during the current COVID surge is taken into consideration, 45,469 Tibetans who are 80 and older may die.

While these estimates are conservative, a true COVID death toll in Tibet cannot be determined without genuine transparency from the Chinese government.

“Unprecedented and not normal”

ICT’s report also includes anecdotal and visual evidence showing that hundreds of bodies are continuously being brought to various sky burial sites in Tibet. Most of the dead are Tibetan elders.

Sources in Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, informed ICT that the vast majority of the Lhasa population are infected with COVID, and the death toll is mounting each day.

A large number of deaths due to COVID were also reported in Tibetan areas outside the officially designated “Tibet Autonomous Region,” which spans only about half of Tibet.

In one social media conversation heard by ICT, a Tibetan urged others in the community not to be lax about COVID, saying many corpses were being brought to a traditional sky burial site near Lhasa.

“On Jan. 2, there were around 100 corpses,” the Tibetan said. “This is unprecedented and not normal.”



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