

My name is Dhondup. I am from Pema county of Amdo Golog and entered exile in May of 2006.

Could you tell us about the nomads and grassland conditions in Amdo Golog?

There are six counties in Golog: Matoe, Machen, Pema, Gade, Darlag and Chigdril. About 95 percent of the people in these areas are nomads. The remaining five percent are semi-nomads who have little land, keep livestock and cultivate barley. I am from a county that is nomadic. Golog is well known for its large horses, yaks and sheep, particularly in Matoe county where lies the head of the three rivers. Mining in the area has brought changes in weather as well. The snowstorms have killed livestock in huge numbers. During the summer there is no rainfall that has resulted in reduced grass growth. Unfortunately, there is widespread hunger in livestock. If not for the change in climate and other factors, the nomads could have survived with an abundance of land for grazing.

What kind of policies on grasslands and nomads did the Chinese government bring in your area?

The government told our village that the environment in our area is deteriorating. Fertile lands have turned into deserts. Pikas (marmots) are held responsible for this change. A huge number of livestock has also made it difficult for nomads to look after, which is why they have asked nomads to live in towns or have them settle permanently.

The government has also built highways on the grasslands. They claim to avoid the over exploitation of medicinal plants such as caterpillar fungus.

Do you agree what the government is saying? If not what do you think are the reasons?

Pikas (marmots) are blamed for turning the land black and we are told to exterminate the Pikas. Despite our belief that taking a life is the greatest sin, families are directed to take part in the campaign to kill Picas. They are charged a fine if they don't take part in this campaign.

Killing pikas does not bring any visible benefits to the land, instead their numbers continue to grow every year. Removing the nomads from grassland to towns is called Phyük skyur tsaskyong in Tibetan. The term means "to remove livestock to conserve the grassland." They claim that animal grazing aggravates the grasslands so keeping animals away from grassland for years could restore the grasses.

An area in Machen county contains all the nomads that have settled in the lowland. Now these nomads have neither land nor livestock. There was no option of selling the livestock because the grazing areas have been wiped out. Thus, livestock are forced to be sold to Chinese Muslims.

Does the Chinese government blame grassland deterioration on livestock or improper management of the grasslands by nomads?

The government blames grassland deterioration on pikas, which is a natural cause. Areas affected by the pikas create difficulties in animal grazing. Nomadic livelihood is the basic survival for many Tibetans. If this is not taken care of it will lead to the marginalisation of Tibetans into the Chinese, which I believe is one of their objectives.

The government has told nomads they can return to the grasslands once the grass has re-grown. Old nomads, who carry strong ties to the old tradition, have complained that they become restless at the new resettlement. However, for some young nomads settling down in new houses allows for riding motorbikes and having fun. The consequences for the settling of nomads are the degradation of skills in animal herding. However, many changes have come to their lives including clothing and lifestyle. For example, girls now have fancy hairstyles and wear makeup, a stark contrast to their old traditions. Nomads have lost their main occupation, losing income with no other new skills to survive. Some survive by scavenging waste materials, such as iron and steel.

When the media inquires about the nomads' new lifestyle, the government tries to show the world that the nomads are doing well. Nomads are required to say that they are living happily in the new settlement. Back in the nomads' lives they work hard whether it is summer or winter. With the arrival of media, nomads say that they live happily here all and it can all be attributed to the gratitude of the Chinese Communist government. Nomads are forced to say these lines in front of the media. The nomads first few days are interesting in the new settlement, but as days pass there is a lack of places to work and engage themselves. Many nomads have complained. Also the fencing in the Golog area is implemented on a huge scale.

Did you find changes in the number of livestock after the implementation of fencing and resettlement policies?

There has been a change in the number of livestock, especially in Matoe County where livestock used to be in abundance. Now there is a reduced number of livestock. This is due to heavy snow that continues to hit the area for the past several years. The Nomads in Dari (Tib: Darlag) county have been reduced to begging. Damkar used to be the richest in Pema county but due to the extensive mining that has resulted in a change of climate which has brought nomads into poverty.

Has there been a change in feeding animals after the fencing policy?

Under the policy Phyuk skyur tsaskyong they have kept the grasslands away free from grazing for five to six years, but the locals are unsure of exactly how it works. They set up Forest Conservation Office to organize this project. But whether it is Phyuk skyur tsaskyong for nomads or forest conservation office for farmers, there has been no benefit for the Tibetans or for the environment.

Have there been any changes in the death of animals after the introduction of the new policies?

Most of the nomads have already settled and there are hardly any livestock left. If the Chinese government is truly concerned about us they would stop implementing their policies. The grassland would not have become deserts if the nomads were not removed.

Are nomads aware of the climate change? Do they discuss these changes among themselves?

Yes, they do. Livestock rely upon the grasslands that need water in the summer. In the summer rain doesn't fall for months and the grass becomes so dry that it cracks when we walk through the fields.

We have the Amnyen Machen range where a few years before the ice collapsed and flooded the nearby nomad settlements. The nomads were left with nowhere to go. During the winter an unprecedented fall of snow reached seven to eight feet. I called my home and learned that it was very cold this winter unlike previous years. Nomads have been facing unprecedented cold in the winter and snowmelt warming the summer. Particularly in Golog where Amnyen Machen and Nyenpo Wooser range has faced changes in its lakes and number more than 300. The lakeshores have decreased a few meters every year. We have seen this change firsthand. Similarly Tso Ngonpo experiences shrinkage by a few meters every year. The many lakes in Tibet are drying up.

How do nomads respond to these changes?

Nomads deal only with their livestock and do not have a strong awareness on other changes. Some believe we are experiencing changes in our climate because we have angered the deities of the mountain by picking medicinal plants. Local Tibetans deem Poemae (A medicinal plant that helps to cure cough and which has a very high value for its commercial purpose) as the heart of the land and Jhethang (is called as *Embelia ribes* in botanical nomenclature) as veins. The harvesting of these plants has resulted in the weakening of the land. This has caused a decrease in overall growth. Grass has not grown and the nomads cannot graze their livestock. The nomads are concerned for the exploitation of medicinal plants for environmental conservation and for their survival as well. Whether it is mining or plucking medicinal plants there are no limitations as the economic benefits outweigh the consequences to the land.

What time did snow fall? Is there a change in timing for snowfall?

In Golog area the snow normally falls in September. In high altitudes such as Matoes, the snow also falls during the summer in the hilltop. In Golog, the snow falls in the end of September. There hasn't been much change in timing. Earlier we could easily say what day of the month that winter and summer started. Now, it is very hard to discern. In Golog, the land has become difficult to dig in September, October and November. It stays this way until April.

Is it also the same with rain fall?

Yes, Langtsi (refers to July) normally has rainfall and Taktsi (refers to June) have sunny days. Now it rains for many months. There are more landslides and floods occurring. The lack of rainfall has results in drying up of grasses.

When do nomads take animals for summer pasture? Do they still take animals on that period of time?

There are many temperature differences at different areas in Golog. In my area in late April and early May the nomads move for summer pasture. The time is pre-determined according to the annual astrology calculation. We call it taktsa and langtsa. The Chinese government has announced that nomads should move before 23 May for summer pasture. Nomads are fined if they leave earlier or later from the fixed date.

Could you tell us about the grassland and climate change that you think is missing in your earlier responses?

I don't think I left anything out. The environment in Tibet is threatened with the Chinese building dams on the Tibetan rivers. They are now introducing the south to north water diversion project, which diverts water from Yangtze to Yellow River. Many places will be used for reservoirs to hold water. Tibetans in Golog are concerned that it not only threatens places where their ancestors have lived but also holy mountains, monasteries and rich minerals in the area. There are also rumours that Tibetans are being forced into relocation to Kekexile to make room for dams in the area.

Tibet is the source of four Khabab rivers Sengey Khabab (Indus), Langchen Khabab (Sutlej), Macha Khabab (Karnali), and Tachok Khabab. It is the source region of Yellow River, Yangtze and Mekong. The protection of Tibet's rivers thus concerns the livelihood of all Asians. The Yellow River is a famous river, but is now drying up. Water from the Yangtze is diverting to the Yellow River to China. Blueprint (Tib: Sathig) is already being conducted.

Pikas are ruining the grassland to some extent but it is not worth killing them, due to the increase in their numbers even after mass exterminations. They are even being found in areas that were earlier free of any damage. Poisoning sometimes does not kill them. Some say Aaphog (device) in this case help to reduce pika.

The Chinese poisoning campaign to kill the Pikas has also killed other wildlife, such as deer. Desertification is very rare in Golog but now all of Tibet is desertifying in one or other way.

I remember when I was small Forest Bureau in Markhog which sent some 40 to 50 trucks loaded with logs daily. The Bureau claimed that they were reforesting but planting on a small scale does not help at all.

If nomads take a log on back of a yak they would be considered a crime. Similarly if the Tibetans are found extracting mineral it is a considered a crime. But many private companies extract minerals and earn huge profits which even do not reach the government. So the logging is not benefiting the government and local Tibetans.

Offices such as Forest Bureau do not have Tibetan employee. These are all staffed by Chinese and Muslims. Even though the land belongs to us we never receive any benefits. The Chinese government claims the land and animals to be owned by the state. There are several taxes on animals such as land tax, meat tax, water tax, etc. No matter if the number increase or decrease nomads have to pay these taxes for their livestock.