

Environmental Concerns and Implementation of Unsustainable Development Policies on the Tibetan Plateau

1) Mining concerns:

Uncontrolled mining on the Tibetan Plateau against the will of the local residents has been one of our greatest concerns. We are informed that these mining activities are carried out without any or very poor corporate commitments and responsibilities. We were told by a witness that at the drilling site/ mining area, loud announcements are carried out in the streets everyday declaring that 'the central government needs to develop and needs these mineral ores. Anybody found revolting against mining would be considered as revolting against the state'. But even under such circumstances, in the past two years, we have witnessed several local oppositions against the mining activities - mostly gold and copper ores in the Tibetan areas as follows;

- *March 2009, Bathang county, Kham Karze (Eastern Tibet)*
- *May 2009, Ser Ngul Lo, Lhara Village, Markham county, Chamdo (Eastern Tibet)*
- *June 2009, Meldro Gyama, Meldro Gungkar county near Lhasa*
- *May, 2010, Wu Yug Sogchen of Namling district in Shigatse (Central Tibet)*

In most of the above cases, when local people took to the streets, it often involves when the concerned mining company directly disregards the aesthetic and social value of the local residents. Or when the higher authorities have turned a blind eye on their grievances against these companies.

The recent mudslide/ landslide incident at Drogchu (Ch: Zhouqu), in the south-east of Kanlho - Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, that took more than thousand innocent lives was also triggered by uncontrolled mining, logging and hydropower projects in that area for many years.

2) Implementation of Unsustainable Development Policies:

For centuries, the Tibetan nomads and herders have successfully maintained a sustainable and mobile lifestyle, traveling from winter to summer pasture lands and autumn to spring pasture lands. In the name of modernization and conservation, (*but also to maintain a tight grip over the nomadic community*), the nomads have been removed from their ancestral pastoral grounds to concrete blocks.

The new policy, *tuimu huancao* in Chinese, meaning closing pastures to restore grasslands. Like most simple ideas, it is overly simple. On practical ground, this policy demands the herders to '*abandon their herds to restore grasslands*'. It assumes that the only way to conserve China's upper watersheds is to remove animals and nomads. It took Chinese scientists 50 years to discover what the nomads have always known, and Chinese policy remains far behind the latest scientific knowledge. State power has relocated nomads into concrete block settlements on the edges of their former lands, with basic rations to ensure they do not die of starvation. Instantly, all their skills, risk management strategies, environmental services, carbon sequestration, traditional knowledge and biodiversity conservation are gone, redundant, as if they had never existed. As of today we know that more than 700,000 nomads has been removed from their ancestral pastoral lands. Recent scientific findings tell a different and more technical view about the

regeneration of the grasslands and the vital role of grazers in replenishing the degraded grasslands. According to these research papers, the carrying capacity of some grasslands were far exceeded partly due to inappropriate land management practices implemented in the 1950s.

Some Chinese researchers have blamed the degradation of these grasslands on many factors such as permafrost degradation, irrational human disturbance (*mining, road construction, conversion of grassland to cropland, gold mining, overgrazing etc.*) and climate warming. More recent studies (*Julia et al, 2008; Tony Lovell and Bruce Ward, 2009*) revealed that grazing actually helps in regenerating the grasslands by improving the soil Carbon/ Nitrogen ratio and prolonging/ extending the growing season.

Herders are being forcibly evicted to make rooms for large-scale projects, like dam and roads. Many are relocated to small concrete blocks, and forced to slaughter their livestock. Furthermore, their lack of other skills prevents them from finding alternate means of making a living.

3) Tourism boom and waste management concerns:

We are worried that many sanctified areas and urban centers inside Tibet as a result of mass tourism might turn into an open dumpsites to manage the inflow of waste generated by tourists, let alone for the loss of Tibetan cultural and social values. This will severely cripple the already dilapidated municipalities that are managing these solid wastes - attracting unwanted scavengers and spreading diseases.

The ongoing campaigns of boosting Tibet's economy by investing huge amounts in tourism and industries would not only impact the marginalized Tibetan community but also encourage the mass influx of Chinese migrant workers and their extended families. According to an official Chinese media, the Tibetan Plateau drew in 1.8 million tourist for the first half year of 2010. It is true that tourism has favored a few Tibetan families but the majority of the households are not able to react to the changes identically or on equal basis. Chinese researchers and academicians have also mentioned that the cash economy is rapidly replacing the traditional self-sufficient economy and exposing the farmers to more volatile market-oriented economic crops and activities, to which they have never coped with earlier.

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) National Development and Reform Commission plans to provide 682 billion Yuan (US\$100bn) as financial support for the western region over the next few years. The funds will be used for 23 new infrastructure projects, including railways, roads, airports, coal mines, nuclear power stations and power grids. Recently, China mentioned that it had completed the drawing up of a detailed "Action Plan for Building Lhasa into an International Tourist City in Five Years".
