

Reporters Without Borders

<http://www.rsf.org/chine-tibet-cut-off-from-the-rest-of-the-23-02-2012,41930.html>

Asia - China

Blackout intensified

Authorities tighten grip, isolating Tibet even more from the outside world

1 March 2012

The government is trying by any means it can to keep Tibet in a state of isolation from the media as the opening of the parliamentary session on 5 March approaches. The head of the Communist Party in Tibet, Chen Quanguo, has [ordered](#) local authorities to step up surveillance of all means of communication, particularly mobile phones and the Internet, in order to "maintain the public's interests and national security".

The writer and blogger **Tsering Woesser** has been placed under virtual house arrest in Beijing for a month. She [told the Associated Press](#) news agency that state security agents had told her she would not be able to leave home today to collect the Prince Claus award at a ceremony at the Dutch embassy and that she would be under surveillance for the whole of March. The Prince Claus foundation bestowed the award on her in the "Breaking Taboos" category. The foundation hailed "her courage in daring to speak out in the name of all those who are reduced to silence or are oppressed, her remarkable work which unites literary skill with political reporting, gathering of information, analysis and campaigning on behalf of Tibetan culture".

Tibet cut off from the rest of the world 23 February 2012

Reporters Without Borders is alarmed at the blackout imposed by Chinese authorities on the provinces of Sichuan and Qinghai, as well as the autonomous region of Tibet, preventing all media coverage of protest movements there.

To this we must add disinformation activities such as the recent hacking of the French-language weekly *Courrier International* by Chinese propagandists.

"At least 15 Tibetan monks have set themselves on fire since March last year, yet little information about this, or about the recent demonstrations in Tibet, has emerged," Reporters Without Borders said.

"Not only are foreign media organizations prevented from covering these events, but the authorities have also organized a veritable disinformation campaign, using pro-government media such as the *Global Times*, which play down the disturbances and accuse the international community of interfering.

"Few media outlets are able to obtain first-hand information and fewer still manage to travel to the regions concerned.

"Out of sight of the world, a major crisis is unfolding. Even Pyongyang has an international media presence, which is not the case in Lhasa."

The press freedom organization added: "As in the past, the Chinese authorities aim to control the Tibetan people behind closed doors, excluding journalists, foreign ones in particular, who might be troublesome witnesses of what is happening.

"They are also trying to restrict all communication between the region and the rest of the world. The Internet is a secondary victim of the crackdown. Connections are cut off, access is blocked and content linked to the unrest is removed – any method can be used to prevent Chinese netizens taking over the baton from journalists and publishing news and information that might embarrass Beijing over its handling of the Tibetan unrest.

"Local community networks are particularly targeted in order to nip in the bud any attempt at mobilising support online."

Crackdown in Tibet

More than 20 police officers went to the home of **Gagkye Drubpa Kyab**, a journalist and teacher, in Serthar county in Sichuan province, on 15 February and arrested him. He remains in detention.

The writer **Kalsang Tsultrim**, known by the pen name Gyitsang Takmig, was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on 30 December 2011. He had been held without charge since 16 December 2010. He was previously [arrested on 27 July 2010](#) for "political error" and [was released on 15 October](#) that year on condition that he did not participate in political activity.

He had distributed a CD containing a personal video message urging the international community to take action and calling for the return of the Dalai Lama. He detailed the suffering of the Tibetan people and expressed concern about the disappearance of their religion and culture, as well as human rights abuses.

Tsultrim had already received warning from the authorities about the message, recorded in June 2009.

On 14 February, Reporters Without Borders also learned, from the [Tibet Post International](#), of the sentencing in December 2010 of the writer **Tsering Norbu** for publishing and distributing a book about the 2008 demonstrations in Tibet. Police arrested him as he was distributing copies of his book in Lhasa, where is now in prison.

Some journalists and writers choose to go into exile in order to be able to write about what is happening in their region. Such was the case of [Gedun Tsering](#), who fled to the northern Indian city of Dharamsala where he published his book "Ghost Writer". The work is in the form of a journal of his journey to India and his life as a refugee. Copies have been given to monasteries, schools and universities and Tibet's four provinces.

Online censorship

Since 24 January, Internet and cell phone networks have been severely disrupted within a radius of 50 km around Seda district in Sichuan province, which was the epicentre of the violent protests.

Websites of Tibetan exile media organizations cannot be accessed. Discussion forums and blogs in the Tibetan language, such as [Sangdhor.com](#) and [Rangdrol.net](#), have also been blocked since 3 February.

On the same day the tag of **Liu Zhiming** (刘志明), an investigative journalist with the Economic Observer, who posted a message about a demonstration on 23 January, was removed from the micro-blogging site Sina Weibo. This is just one example among many of the removal of content referring to the current disturbances in Tibet.

The strategy adopted by the Chinese authorities, namely cutting off certain provinces or regions from the media and online worlds in order to subdue them silently, is not new and has been applied

elsewhere.

Tibet has already been the target of particularly [harsh restrictions on communications](#). In May 2011, the Internet was a secondary victim of a [crackdown on demonstrations in Inner Mongolia](#). The region of [Xinjiang was cut off from the outside world](#) for several months after inter-ethnic riots in the regional capital Urumqi on 5 July 2009.

Response to measures aimed at foreign journalists

Foreign journalists, banned from entering Tibet, have been prevented by the police from covering demonstrations by Tibetans in other Chinese provinces. In the last week of January in Sichuan province, a crew from *CNN* was arrested at a toll barrier and prevented from travelling to neighbouring Tibet.

Aware that such restrictions are unlawful, the authorities regularly cite bad weather or the poor state of the roads to restrict access to the autonomous region.

Consequently, journalists are forced to resort to clandestine methods to get into the Tibetan-inhabited provinces. Jonathan Watts, a reporter for the Guardian, was among those who managed to elude the barriers and to reach the town of Aba (Ngaba in Tibetan). He and others have spoken of the heavy military presence in the region.

Foreign journalists suspected of wishing to defy police instructions are victims of harassment by the security forces.

Some have complained of being followed, others that they have been escorted to the airport by the police, questioned for several hours, forced to wipe the pictures they have taken and have had their equipment seized.

Identity checks are not confined to press cards and passports but include temporary residence permits, which journalists must carry with them at all times. These infringements create an atmosphere of constant surveillance which add to the stress levels and affect the psychological well-being of some media workers.

On 2 February, some foreign correspondents working in China asked the authorities for free access to the provinces that were closed to them. In a statement issued by the Foreign Correspondents'

Club of China, which is illegal and has no official status, they claimed the right to travel freely and to interview anyone prepared to be interviewed.

Two days ago, the FCCC also urged journalists to take care and be alert in their work.

Social unrest a major worry for Beijing

The conditions in which foreign media workers try to function have been worsening elsewhere in the country since February last year. Journalists who try to report on the various protests around the country, particularly conflicts between residents and local authorities, have been the target of reprisals, which clearly bear the hallmark of local or central authorities.

On 15 February in Panhe in the eastern province of Zhejiang, three journalists were assaulted while they were covering demonstrations against the seizure and sale of land by the government, similar to protests late last year in Wukan over the sale of land against local people's wishes.

The French journalist **Baptiste Fallevoz**, of the television station *France 24*, and his Chinese assistant **Jack Zhang** were on their way to the scene when their car was hit by another vehicle. They were then attacked by thugs in plain clothes. Zhang, whose camera was smashed, received a severe blow to the head. Both were put aboard a plane for Wenzhou. Police attributed the incident to village rivalries.

On the same day, the Dutch freelance journalist **Remko Tanis** suffered a similar assault. Tanis, who worked for the *Netherlands Press Association*, was interviewing protesters when about 100 men burst into the building where he was and severely beat him and seized his memory cards and documents. The journalist said he was relatively unharmed but he feared for the safety of those he had interviewed.

The FCCC also reported an assault on a video journalist who was attacked by security agents in plain clothes who hit him several times in the face while he was covering protests on Wangfujing shopping street in Beijing on 19 February. His equipment was seized.

A dozen or so other journalists were harassed and roughed up during the crackdown.

For their part, the Chinese authorities complain that they receive a bad press abroad, a criticism aimed expressly at foreign journalists who they say give prominent coverage to dissidents, demonstrations, popular discontent and pollution, rather than the country's economic and cultural achievements.

They accused 900 foreign reporters of covering events in the country in a negative fashion, based on a double standard and a "Cold War mentality". To counter what they see as biased coverage of the country, the authorities have embarked on a campaign of disinformation. *Courrier International*, which translates and publishes excerpts of articles from international newspapers, was hacked by an official Chinese website, [China Tibet Online](#), for propaganda purposes. It attributed an article translated from the Beijing newspaper *Huanqiu Shibao* to the Paris-based weekly.

The article, headlined "French media: harmony, development mostly desired for Tibetans", quoted a report from a remote area of Tibet purportedly published in *Courrier International*. The article in reality contained passages from *Huanqiu Shibao*, which is part of the *People's Daily* group. It condemned secessionist aims of Tibetan exiles abroad and was never published by *Courrier International*.

China fell six places in the [2011-2012 world press freedom index](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders, and now stands in 174th places of 178 countries.

Rare footage of the demonstrations:

You can download those documents on our website :

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