

China mobilizes to meet Tibet burning protests

By John Garnaut

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CHINESE security forces are arming themselves with guns, fire hydrants and 1960s communist propaganda as they battle a wave of self-immolations that is spreading across the Tibetan plateau.

Two young Tibetan men set themselves alight in Qinghai province on Wednesday, bringing the total to more than 35 over the past year. Most have died.

Tenzin Khedup, 24, died on the spot on Wednesday, while his colleague, Ngawang Norphel, 22, is reportedly being treated for serious injuries. They were carrying Tibetan flags, shouting pro-independence slogans and calling for the return of the Dalai Lama, according to Radio Free Asia. Photos were posted on the internet, despite tightening restrictions on movement and electronic communication.

Last month the morbid form of protest arrived for the first time in Lhasa, the region's spiritual and political capital, when a 19-year-old man died and a 25-year-old man was seriously injured.

They emerged from Lhasa's Mandala Hotel and ignited themselves outside Jokhang, Tibet's most important monastery.

The hotel and dozens of others have since been shut, petrol sales have been tightly restricted and dozens of people taken into custody, according to Tibetan sources.

Squads of orange-clad fire fighters, with fire trucks and four-wheeled buggies, have now joined clusters of police SWAT teams, riot police and paramilitaries in camouflage to prevent monks and Tibetan lay persons from making public spectacles of self-harm.

They are armed with fire hydrants - carried in hand and concealed in rows under fire blankets - as well as semi-automatic weapons and long black poles apparently designed for the safe handling of burning bodies.

Jokhang Temple has been stripped of most of its yak-butter candles, replaced by fluorescent lights, while identification checks are now required to enter monasteries and other public spaces.

While Communist Party officials have described the self-immolations as a form of terrorism, others argue that the notion of national martyrdom was imported with the communists in the 1950s and 1960s.

"This kind of thing has never happened in the Tibetan tradition before," said Tsering Shakya, a Tibet historian at the University of British Columbia. "It traces back to Communist propaganda figures, such as Lei Feng."

Lei Feng was a cult figure, selflessly devoted to Chairman Mao, who was said to have been killed by a falling telephone pole while directing a military vehicle to reverse onto a road.

In London, the Dalai Lama expressed hope that change would come to Tibet when Beijing's leaders were forced to respond to Chinese aspirations for freedom and democracy.

Tibetans who left suicide notes have addressed fellow Tibetans rather than Chinese authorities, perhaps reflecting a view that dialogue is futile.

"We could not contribute significantly towards the Tibetan religion and culture and we could not [help bring about] economic benefits to Tibetans," said the suicide note of Wednesday's victims, according to Radio Free Asia.

"Therefore, we have decided to self-immolate with the hope that His Holiness the Dalai Lama may live long and return to Tibet as soon as possible ... Everyone should unite to uphold the cause of the Tibetan race and nationality."

Dr Shakya said: "They are trying to mobilise Tibetan people and warn of the danger of the disappearance of traditional culture."