

Tibetans Accused of Inciting Self-Immolations
By Andrew Jacobs
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BEIJING — Security officials in the northwestern Chinese province of Gansu have arrested five Tibetans and accused them of inciting a series of self-immolations late last year by convincing participants they would become heroes in death, state news media reported. Four of those detained were Buddhist monks, who the police say were guided by a Tibetan exile organization.

The arrests, announced Wednesday by Xinhua, the state news agency, are part of an increasingly desperate government campaign to stop the spate of suicidal protests through intimidation, jail time and rewards for those who cooperate with the police.

Human rights groups have criticized the crackdown as counterproductive, saying it will only fuel the desperation that has convinced 107 people to set themselves on fire since 2009. In February alone there have been seven self-immolations in Tibetan regions of China, including two teenagers who died together last week in Sichuan Province.

In recent weeks, the authorities have detained 70 people accused of helping organize, encourage or publicize self-immolations. Chinese courts have so far shown little leniency toward the accused, sentencing more than a dozen ethnic Tibetans to long prison terms, and in one case last month, a suspended death sentence.

Those jailed include a 20-year-old artist from Lhasa, the capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, who received two years in labor camp after the police found images of self-immolators on his cellphone during a routine check, Radio Free Asia reported last week.

The self-immolations have followed a grim pattern, with the Tibetans, many of them young monks, torching their fuel-soaked garments in public to protest Beijing's hard-line policies in the region. Many also shout out for the return of the Dalai Lama, the exiled spiritual leader, as they are consumed by flames.

According to the brief Xinhua account, the five men arrested in Gansu Province were part of a conspiracy that involved a journalist from the Voice of America and the Tibetan Youth Congress, an exile group in India that advocates Tibetan independence.

The account said that one of the suspects, Karong Takchen, a 21-year-old monk, traveled from Sichuan to "organize self-immolation activities," eventually convincing three people to join the protests in late October and early November. Working with three of the others, Xinhua said, the monk bought gasoline and photographed the men as they burned to death. The account described their crimes as "self-immolation homicide."

Tsewang Rigzin, president of the Tibetan Youth Congress, called the accusations "baseless and fallacious," saying the organization does not have members in China. He noted that the prosecutions of those arrested in recent months have often relied on forced confessions involving torture. Trials, he said, have been brief and in most cases, the accused have not had lawyers nor have they been allowed to speak in court.

"What the Chinese government needs to do is address the underlying grievances," he said in an interview from Dharamsala, India. "Brute force will not resolve the problem."

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