

Tragedy in Tibet reveals Chinese Government's exploitation¹

On March 29, China's State media reported that 83 miners had presumably died following a major landslide at the site of a gold mine in Gyama Valley, near the Tibetan capital, Lhasa. A few days later, 66 miners were confirmed dead and 17 were declared missing despite massive rescue efforts.

Reports from Tibet further stated that the miners (only two of them were Tibetans) were asleep in their tents when the tragedy occurred. They were buried by a 3-kilometre wide and 30 metres deep mass of rocks and debris.

An ignorant former French PM, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, a great friend of Communist China, recently told a Chinese journalist at the Boao Forum: "I have never been to Tibet. It is a region with high altitude." But there is more than the altitude; in many ways, Tibet is a special place.

Beijing based writer and dissident Tsering Woeser, brings out another dimension of the tragedy in her blog: "I mention Songtsen Gampo often, always in the hope that those greedy cadres and companies would show some mercy."

The Gyama Valley is one of the most sacred places in Tibet; it is the birth place of Songtsen Gampo, the founder of the Tibetan empire in the 7th century, the largest empire in Asia at that time. Till recently, several historical places such as the Gyelpo Khangkar, containing an image of the King and his two Chinese and Nepalese queens, were by visited large crowds of Tibetans pilgrims.

Woeser reminds her countrymen: "In Han Chinese culture, the birthplace of all former dynasties' emperors is considered to be the treasured place of 'fengshui', referred to as 'dragon's pulse'. Gyama, with its many sacred and

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beautiful places, is where the 'dragon's pulse' exists in Tibet and it should never have to endure such disemboweling hardship as it does today."

Unfortunately, Chinese cadres are unaware of the 'Tibetan pulse'. For Woesser, who visited the place in 2005, the landslide is: "not a natural, but a man-made disaster. Locals say loud and clear how crazy the mining has become there." The mining project just shows "the lack of empathy by Chinese government towards Tibetan Culture and sentiment", she bitterly complained.

Ironically, *Xinhua* had reported in June 2012: "A multi-metal mine in the birthplace of Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo has the potential to be among the world's 50 biggest mines of its kind by deposits and may generate an annual product value of 712 million US \$ by the end of 2015."

Jiang Liangyou, Party Secretary of the mine's owner, Tibet Huatailong Mining Development (under the state-owned National Gold Group Corporation or CNGG), had then promised: "The prospecting results are subject to independent third-party verification overseas".

It appears now that the foreign advices were not followed, triggering the tragedy.

As late as June 2012, Jiang had boasted: "Phenomenal changes will be brought to Tibet's economic and social development, because, after the expansion, Gyama Mine may generate tax revenue equivalent to one-sixth of the current fiscal revenue of the government of Tibet Autonomous Region."

Xinhua however admitted: "Before the mining area was taken over by Huatailong in late 2009, a dozen private miners were caught up in a rat race

for the rich ore supplies, ignoring their responsibilities to the local community and environment.”

Sun Zhaoxue, general manager of CNGG had publicly announced that Huatailong would honor its social responsibility and “bring local residents long-lasting benefits through environmental protection and community-building efforts.”

That was last year. He had then affirmed: “The answer, in our mind, is to build Jiama into a large, environmentally-friendly mine equipped with leading technologies.”

Ironically, the mine has been projected as the ‘Gyama Model’ by the Ministry of Land and Resources in Beijing, and many Chinese mine managers regularly visited the place ‘to learn from Huatailong's experiences’.

Nine months ago, another manager Teng proudly asserted: “The golden rule we have been following here is to always be responsibility-aware and harmony-aware.”

Today, a report prepared by the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) based in Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, believes that China's large-scale exploitation of mineral resources in Tibet caused the recent disaster.

Tenzin Norbu, the Head of the CTA’s Environment Desk says: “Tibet's rich mineral deposits have become a resource curse for the local residents and ecosystem. Since the late '60s, these mineral deposits have been exploited in various scales, mostly under poor environmental norms and regulations. ...The minerals extracted, copper, chromium, gold, lead, iron and zinc are the minerals of greatest interest to Chinese and other foreign miners operating in Tibet.”

Interestingly, the President Xi Jinping (then visiting Africa), Premier Li Keqiang as well as the entire Standing Committee of the Politburo personally expressed their grief over the tragedy and “gave important instructions for the rescue work”. The Party seems shaken by the incident; it seems to have become a prestige issue for Beijing. But will the new leadership be able to take the ‘yak’s pulse’? One can doubt in view of the precedents in Tibet.

One collateral: when the China National Gold Group Corporation acquired the rights from the previous owners in 2009, one of them was Rapid Results Investment based in ...the British Virgin Island! Some 590 million US \$ was paid to this company. The news came soon after the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) began leaking the details of 2 million emails and other documents on the famous fiscal paradises. Just a coincidence!