

China sentences 76 over Tibet riots

Fears of further violence as 50th anniversary approaches of failed Tibet rebellion and Dalai Lama's flight into exile

Tania Branigan in Beijing

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China has sentenced 76 people and detained more than 950 since last year's deadly riots in Tibet, state media reported today.

The news comes as officials gear up for one of the most sensitive events in years: the 50th anniversary of the failed rebellion that led to the Dalai Lama's flight into exile on 10 March.

The state news agency Xinhua attributed the sentencing and arrest figures to Nyima Tsering, the deputy head of the regional parliament, but gave no details of alleged offences, sentences or the detainees' fate.

Last year's unrest in the Tibetan capital, Lhasa, broke out on 14 March, a few days after the anniversary, and spread to other areas. Beijing claims 22 people died, mostly at the hands of rioters, while exile groups say many times that number were killed in the protests and subsequent military crackdown.

The government has released few details of the aftermath of the worst violence in the region for decades.

Cao Bianjiang, the deputy mayor of Lhasa, said fresh unrest could not be ruled out. "We hope for peace and stability in Lhasa. However, some people don't want to see Lhasa enjoy economic growth and people enjoy happy life."

He was addressing foreign reporters on a rare and tightly controlled government trip to the region.

Tsering Shakya, from the Institute for Asian Research at the University of British Columbia, said: "The security setup and the preparedness of the security is on very high alert, so there is no element of surprise that the protesters could use. It is really very, very unlikely that there could be any protests like there were last year."

China has declared a new holiday next month to mark its defeat of the 1959 pro-independence uprising and the elimination of feudalism. Tibetan campaign groups have described Serfs Emancipation Day as "provocative".

The tight security still in place in Lhasa means some Tibetans are turning to silent protest to vent their frustration with the authorities and their anger at the crackdown that followed last year's unrest.

Xinhua reported a plan to boycott the Tibetan new year, which begins on 23 February, blaming "a campaign by secessionists". Tibetans in mourning do not take part in new year festivities.

The news conference heard from Norgyal, a monk from the Jokhang temple who disrupted a media tour shortly after the riots. At the time, the lamas had told reporters that the authorities were lying to them. But according to Xinhua, Norgyal said yesterday he was "misled by a group of people" to protest.

"I was neither taken into custody nor punished [as a result]. My life and religious study have been normal," he said.

Last month, the authorities in Lhasa launched a "strike hard" campaign in which at least 81 people were detained and thousands checked by security officials.

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