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# Report from Chengdu

By Hari Kunzru

Back in Beijing, after a tense couple of days in Chengdu. The city is the Eastern gateway to Tibet, located at the foot of the mountains. It has a huge PLA base, and was the jumping off point for the troops which are now saturating Tibet. The serious action is now apparently in the villages. There are reports of serious clashes in several rural districts, though Lhasa is now locked down. Police have been killed, and in the Aba area, the ratio of Tibetans to army is now 1:1 according to someone I talked to. I met a couple of journos who'd tried to get into Tibet hiding under blankets in a car. They'd been picked up - everyone seems to have failed to get into the areas of Tibet and Sichuan where the ongoing violence is concentrated.

The government are now taking a hand-picked group of journalists to Lhasa to view the damage done by the Tibetan rioters - Han were targeted, people burnt alive in shops etc. The Chinese feel the Western media has failed to report the suffering of the Han settlers (who have been moved in en masse since 1959 in an attempt to alter the ethnic and cultural make-up of Tibet). They portray the riots as entirely orchestrated by the 'Dalai clique'. Tearful Han are shown on TV mourning dead relatives. Tibetan officials confirm that yes, the Dalai Lama was behind the lot - he has 'shown his true face' according to China Daily.

In Chengdu, Han are paranoid - the city has a huge Tibetan population, clustered in streets around the Wu Hou temple - which is dedicated to an early emperor and his chief minister, who managed to unite the kingdom - inscriptions around the walls celebrate unity, and praise these god/statesmen for their ability to outwit those who would cause splits - cultural ideas about the indivisibility of China are deep seated. Just outside the temple you find a line of cop cars, and as you go through the Tibetan quarter the presence is oppressive. Van-loads of riot police parked up every 50 m. cruising on motorbikes. Jeeps with loudspeakers moving loiterers on, stopping anyone parking their cars. Photos not welcome. This is stepped down from a couple of days ago, when they were carrying arms, and there were tanks parked in the city centre. Tibetans, including many monks, are still going about their business - shops selling food, handicrafts, religious items, are still open. I had tea in a Tibetan cafe in the middle of the locked-down area, and talked (through a Han interpreter) to a young monk. Not safe to discuss anything serious - and besides the monk and the woman interpreting for me only shared some Sichuan dialect - the monk didn't speak Mandarin. At night the streets of the town centre (I should say city, the population is 11 million) are pretty empty - Han not turning up to work at restaurants because of fear of attack, people leaving town, cancelling parties. I was due to meet some writers to talk freedom of expression stuff, but all 7 suddenly found family commitments which prevented them keeping our appointment.

The internet was almost unusable by the end of yesterday - I had to resort to asking friends in Britain to mail Tibet news - scarily certain proxies I'd been using to surf banned sites were now letting me enter URL's, then blocking - seems that perhaps the govt keep them open so they can monitor traffic through them. Even proxy chaining stopped working. I saw the Guardian bureau chief this afternoon, who said that Alan Rusbridger had made an official complaint to the embassy about his paper being blocked - and hey presto it's back up, at least here in Beijing - so's the BBC. I saw some video which people have smuggled out, including CCTV stuff. Very violent. Reports of rioters 'voluntarily surrendering themselves' to the authorities cite ever increasing numbers. In the 600's earlier this evening. This is universally agreed to be the biggest Tibetan uprising since 1959. One NGO guy I talked to, who has extensive Tibet experience, says that he's most worried about what happens post Olympics. Chances are things will carry on in this heated way up until August - possibly getting worse. But after the world's focus moves on, the authorities will do the things they're not quite able to

do now.

For a flavour of the tone here, see this, which is the lead article in today's English language *China Daily*.

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-03/26/content\\_6565420.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2008-03/26/content_6565420.htm)

It reports an open letter, apparently initiated by Chinese students in Britain. It's important to note that while this may be concocted by the authorities, these sentiments are widely shared - the nationalist sentiment here can't be overstated:

The open letter, widely posted in online forums, said: 'The Chinese nation, peace-loving, refined and cultivated, has long swallowed humiliation and submitted to insults. It can no longer be a silent lamb.' It asked all Chinese to send protest letters, faxes and e-mails to Western media organizations asking them to apologize for their false reports.

'Only through our efforts can we protect our rights, let the West hear our voice, and safeguard the image of China and national reunification.'