**Three Tibetan Herders Self-Immolate in Protest**

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BEIJING — In a fresh illustration of growing turmoil among ethnic Tibetans in Sichuan Province, three livestock herders set themselves on fire to protest what they saw as political and religious repression at the hands of the Chinese authorities, according to a Tibetan rights group and an ethnic Tibetan living in Beijing.

If confirmed, the latest cases would bring the total self-immolations over the past year to 19, an unprecedented wave of self-inflicted violence among the tiny ethnic minority in China, according to scholars. They were also apparently the first by lay people, rather than current or former members of the clergy, suggesting that self-immolation may be gaining popularity as a form of dissent.

The incidents took place Friday in a remote village in Seda County, once a center of Buddhist teaching, but reports did not surface until the weekend because the government has cut Internet and telephone connections to the area, said Tsering Woeser, a Tibetan poet in Beijing.

She said that one of the three men had died and that the other two, believed to be about 30 and 60 years old, were severely injured.

Local officials denied any new self-immolations had occurred. ”Everything is all right here, although we still have no Internet access,” Wang Yongkang, the party secretary for Seda County, told Global Times, a Communist Party English-language daily.

The self-styled Tibetan government in exile said Monday it had not confirmed the reports from Seda. But at a press conference in Dharamsala, India, the organization’s seat, one official said the self-immolations should provoke the Chinese government to re-examine its repressive policies toward Tibetans.

“What is so wrong in [Tibet](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/china/tibet/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) that people are resorting to such drastic action?” asked Dicki Chhoyang, head of the information department.

Faced with the worst outbreak of unrest among ethnic Tibetans since the 2008 riots in Lhasa, Tibet’s capital, authorities sealed off a number of counties in Sichuan Province and vastly intensified security. The government blames Tibetan separatists for inciting the violence.

The police last month clashed with protesters in Seda, which is on the border of Gansu Province, and in Luhuo County, known in Tibetan as Draggo, about 80 miles, to the south. Accounts of the number of deaths ranged from two to as many as 11, with dozens wounded.

Chinese officials assert that security officers shot one rioter dead in self-defense on Jan. 23 after a mob armed with rocks, batons and gas bottles stormed the police station in Luhuo. Another protester was killed in Seda the following day when rioters attacked the police station there, they said.

Until Friday, the ethnic Tibetans who set themselves afire were all reported to be monks, nuns or former clergy members. The first case occurred in the spring of 2009 when a monk burned himself at a monastery in Aba, a town in the northwestern corner of Sichuan Province.

The latest reports suggest that self-immolation as a form of protest is spreading beyond the Tibetan clergy, Robert J. Barnett, director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia University in New York, said in a telephone interview.

Ms. Woeser, the poet, said that the three recent victims had herded sheep and cows and were not members of the clergy. Unlike the others, they lived far from the larger towns and monasteries where past cases had occurred, according to news reports.

“There is a lot of frustration in the Tibetan areas,” Mr. Barnett said. “People are saying they aren’t being listened to; the government didn’t respond constructively to the protests in 2008 and didn’t respond constructively to the whole year we’ve seen of self-immolations.”

In Sichuan Province in particular, he said, the authorities have blocked off monasteries and adopted other aggressive measures that have raised tensions.

*Michael Wines contributed reporting, and Mia Li contributed research.*

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