How Can I Forget Lhasa, March 14?

The following is a translation of a blog post (published at ifeng on March 18, 2008) written by a Shenzhen girl working in an eyeglass store in Lhasa.

[In translation]

Today is March 18 and our company resumed business. According to the rotation schedule, I am on the late shift today beginning at 1pm. But based upon my awareness of the overall situation outside, I decided to proceed two hours earlier so that I can get off work two hours earlier. I wanted to make sure that I can catch a bus instead of hurting my wallet with taxi fare.

My plan may be perfect, but reality did not oblige. I waited for one hour before the bus came. Since I wanted people to be safe and the criminals be apprehended soon, I had no complaints about the inspections being made by the armed police. I would never say nasty words against the hardworking and responsible armed police for that lost hour. On the contrary, the sight of them patrolling the streets of Lhasa makes us ordinary citizens feel safer.

One-and-a-half hours later, I walked into the store. When my colleagues saw me, they asked about what happened to me. I am somewhat unusual because I did not stay in the group dormitory. Instead, I live in a family hotel near the Sera Monastery. In my district, the mobile telephones were not working. One can call the fixed-line telephones, but one cannot call out. On the afternoon of March 14, I had fled back home. Since my colleagues could not contact me, they were all worried about me. Fortunately, my rotten luck was not that bad and I arrived home safely. So now I told them about my experiences on March 14.

On March 14, I was on the late shift too. At past noon, I took the public bus along North Ling Khor Road. At the intersection 50 meters in front of the Ramoche Monastery, I spotted from the bus a dozen police officers and several dozen civilians. My immediate reaction was that there was a curfew at the Ramoche Monastery. I got off at the People's Hospital stop more than four hundred meters down the street. I entered our store and I said: "Curfew over at Ramoche Monastery!" At the time, my colleagues did not pay too much attention. They said that there might have been some incident. I was uneasy.

The clients came and went. By the time for lunch, it was already 1:45pm. The office for my company was situated even closer to the Ramoche Monastery. From afar, I could see my office colleagues gathered outside the front door watching the disturbance on the street outside the Ramoche Monastery. A colleague said that a Han female clutching a bag in hand had sprinted down the street and entered our dental clinic. She sat down on the sofa and started to cry emotionally. She said that over at the Ramoche Monastery, the Tibetans were assaulting all Han people and the buses have stopped running. I ate one bite and I spotted two Tibetan young men escorting a third Tibetan young man with a bleeding face past our entrance and entering the 120 facility across the street. We knew that things have gone worse down there, but we firmly believed that nothing major would happen. After lunch, a father and a daughter came in to purchase eyeglasses. The girl is a high school student at Lhasa Middle School, and the father is an official at the Tibet Department of Health. While they were picking through the eyeglasses, the colleagues from the dental department next door stood in front of the store to discuss the violent incident. I had to keep the clients company and then periodically sneak out quickly to take a look. Each time, I saw that the mob was getting closer to us. Smoke was rising from the direction of Barkhor Street, and it was frightening. I asked the father and the daughter whether they were scared and they said no. The daughter said that only a couple of people died, so there was nothing to be afraid of. The father who is an official said that they won't be able to start anything and there was nothing to be afraid of since he had gone through 1989. But those words could not alleviate my uneasiness.

By around 3pm, the girl finally finished her eyesight test and she left immediately in order to go back to school. Her father stayed behind while the eyeglasses were being prepared. By this time, my colleagues have pulled down the rolling gate on the side entrance and they even pulled down the
rolling gate on the front entrance halfway. My heart was pounding. I made out the invoice and I received the money. The colleagues from the various departments were still standing outside to watch. About 15 minutes later, the client departed. We immediately packed up, closed down the store and went to the company office.

By the time I got outside, the disturbance had reached the intersection between North Lin Khor Road and Youth Road. The smoke was getting thicker. Coming at us were the crowds from the Wenzhou Commercial Center (facing North Lin Khor Road near the Ramoche Monastery) and Youth Road looking for safety. I weaved my way through the running crowd. Before I reached the office entrance, I heard someone call out to me. I stopped and looked. It was the 17-year-old Tibetan girl staying at the same family hotel as I do. She is lovely, capable, gentle, vegetarian and loves to laugh. As soon as we saw each other, we hugged together. The young girl said: "Sister, this is very scary! I am very scared!" Although I am a few years older than her, I have never seen any disturbances before -- the dense smoke was rolling in, the sirens of the ambulances were screeching and people were rushing past me. Fewer than ten meters away, several dozen Tibetan young men were throwing rocks, shouting and cursing. People were screaming and shouting everywhere. It was frightening. I brought the young girl to our office and let her stay with my colleagues. Then I went out to the neighboring Tibetan Architectural Design Institute and used my mobile camphone to take photos of the disturbance on Youth Road.

A new American-style fast food restaurant named Dicos had just opened up this year on Youth Road. Several dozen Tibetan youth regarded that this was their main target. Of course, they were not going to spare the stores around it either. They threw rocks and applied force continuously. Behind them, the police tried to stop them without much effect. When the police approached, the several dozen persons would run towards the Institute of Architectural Design while screaming. The spectators in front of the Institute of Architectural Design would run too. It was very chaotic. Once the police retreated, the several dozen Tibetan youth returned to continue what they were doing. I took some photos and then I went back to the office. The gate of the office was shut and I did not see the young Tibetan girl. I started to yell out her name. Half a minute later, the rolling gate opened by half a meter and the young girl slipped out. My colleagues and the boss lady were peering outside. They advised me not to return to where I was staying and to stay with them at the office instead. But under these circumstances, there was no place more reassuring than one's nest. So I decide to go back home with the young girl.

By this time, traffic was restricted on North Lin Khor Road from the intersection with the Fukang Hospital. No vehicles except for 120 ambulances, the District People's Hospital ambulances and certain government vehicles were allowed to enter the section of North Lin Khor Road and Youth Road. We were unable to find a public bus or taxi. Traffic restrictions were also imposed on the section of Niangre Road towards Beijing Middle Road. But the section from South Niangre Road to the Second Ring Road and the western section of the North Lin Khor Road were smooth running with some military vehicles going into the area of disturbance.

Due to the fear of assault by Tibetans, I put on a surgical mask. I walked with the young girl to the vicinity of Xuexin Village where we got on a minibus. There were only Tibetans on the bus, and I remembered what the young girl told me on the way walking over. She said that near the Ramoche Monastery, the rioting Tibetan young men were attacking any Han person that they came across -- they rushed over and attacked with knives, rocks and sticks while chanting: "Kill him! Kill him!" I was anxious for a dozen minutes or so until several Han persons got on the bus. Then I relaxed a little. A few more Tibetan persons got on afterwards. A Han young man yielded his seat to a Tibetan old man. At that moment, I felt that Han and Tibetan people do not have to behave like what was happening in front of the Ramoche Monastery.

The minibus did not take us directly to where I live. We got off at the Sacred City Garden on East Zaji Road and we turned into North Sera Road. It took 15 to 20 minutes to walk home. By that time, the stores near Sacred City Garden Road on North Sera Road were all closed even though this was very far from the scene of the disturbances. There were very few pedestrians around. At the intersection from Middle Cisongtang Road to the Sera Monastery, armed police officers were present. The atmosphere felt as if war had broken out.

We entered our neighborhood and the normally friendly Tibetan security guards (including a cousin of
The young girl sternly said to the young girl in Tibetan: "How can you come back in the company of a Han person? Aren't you afraid of getting beaten up?" The young girl was scared and did not respond. We got back to the hotel and it was quiet and calm as if nothing had happened outside. We went up to the roof and we saw that the heavy smoke had covered half the sky in Lhasa. The young girl told me that the Tibetans were setting fire to the stores around the Ramoche Monastery, even those that still had people inside. They were also throwing rocks at the Han people and the police, they used knives to slash people and they beat them with sticks.

The young girl must have been scared. She had a lost, uncomprehending look with a tint of sadness. But above all, she could not believe that this was happening.

That night, the landlord went out to pick up someone. He told me that the street on which our store was located was vandalized, and there were two burned out motorcycles in front of our store. At the time, I was glad that I had returned earlier or else something bad might have happened. He told me that Youth Road, the Wenzhou Commercial City, Beijing Middle Road, Beijing East Road, Chomsyikhand and Barkhor Street were all but unrecognizable. At the time, I kept thinking and thinking, but I could not imagine just how they could be unrecognizable.

My father called me that night. He said that he watched the Hong Kong news report about the trouble in Lhasa and he wanted me to take care. Based upon my understanding of my father, the news report probably did not indicate that this was so serious and that was why he did not call me immediately. I did not know what the situation was like outside, I did not know how my colleagues were and I did not know how my friends were doing.

I stayed inside the hotel for two whole days without stepping outside. Fortunately, my landlord sometimes went out to check out the situation and let us know what was going on. The little girl was becoming increasingly worried as more and more news came in. The brilliant Tibetan smile did not appear at all. On one occasion, she sought out my embrace and said with teary eyes: "Sister, I am so scared!"

I asked her: "What are you scared of? Are you scared that since you are with us, you will be assaulted by your own Tibetan people?"

She shook her head and said in a low voice: "No."

"So what are you afraid of? Are you afraid that the police might arrest you? Afraid that we Han people will assault you?"

"No." She lifted he head and replied with sad eyes: "I am afraid for my Tibetan friends. I don't know what is happening to them. I heard that many people have been arrested. I have a friend who went to vandalize some stores. He has been arrested. Sister, what can be done? I am so scared!" Then her eyes became even redder.

If I had been younger, I would be holding her head and crying together. We cannot change how things are, we are worried about our friends and we don't know what is happening. This is when we feel very vulnerable. But I ultimately did not cry. I did my best to talk to her in a fair and balanced manner based upon what I know, so that she can understand that what happened was not the fault of any one person, and whoever did wrong will have to take responsibility for their actions.

March 17. I heard that the situation has finally become stable. The buses were running again. I could no longer suppress my need to look at the world outside, so I went out.

As soon as I got out of the neighborhood, I saw a dozen military vehicles at the intersection of the Sera Monastery. There were armed police officers checking people in each direction. I showed them my ID and they inspected my handbag. Amidst their thanks for my cooperation, I used my mobile telephone to take a photo of them. Before I even put my hand down, an armed police officer told me not to move. He came over to check what I took. Somewhere in the back on the other side of the street, a senior officer in a military vehicle called out to bring me over there. I did not know what to
do. There were so many police officers there that there was no way that I can resist. So I asked the police officer carefully, "You are not going to arrest me?"

The police officer smiled and comforted me: "No, don't worry."

I breathed a sigh of relief and I was more composed.

I stood in front of the senior officer. He took a look at me first and then he turned on the mobile telephone to see what was inside. He asked me how many photos I have taken and why I was taking them. He said that he was going to delete the photos. He warned me not to take photos with my mobile phone. What was I going to say in front of him except to agree?

Ten minutes later, all was okay! I was a good citizen. There was no problem and I was released! I must thank the armed police officer for not locking me up.

I continued to wait at the bus stop for a bus to go to my company. This time, I waited for more than half an hour.

The bus continued on the route. The police hospital at East Zaji Road had many armed police officers around as if it were an important military base. The next intersection also had many armed police officers there. By this time, the mobile telephone was receiving signals. We passed the Second Ring Road and I saw many militia police officers. Then we reached South Sera Road where I occasionally spotted burnt out motorcycles and bicycles. By this time, I had the feeling that I was entering a disaster area.

We entered North Lin Khor Road. A green armored vehicle was parked at the entrance of the police station. There were armed policemen at the intersection to the Ramoche Monastery. The stores across the Ramoche Monastery were unrecognizable because all that was left were blackened rubble. The Anqi Pharmacy at the Wenzhou Commercial City was covered up with red-white-blue canvas. It was supposed to have been vandalized and set on fire. This is the place where I had worked for more than half a month and I got acquainted with many Tibetan friends. But it was now a wasteland.

Further down, we reached the intersection with Youth Road. It was shocking to see the 120 Dermatology Clinic and the eight stores adjoining it all reduced to charred rubble. Smoke was still rising with the terrible smell of burning rubber. I cannot imagine that these were the clothing stores that I used to see every day. Some of these stores had just opened up this year.

I closed my eyes and I did not look.

I got off the bus and I inspected the stores that belonged to my company. Apart from the smashed office sign and a ripped wall poster, nothing was damaged. The stores nearby were not so lucky. One of them had the display window smashed. Another store was broken into and completely trashed. Many of the second-floor windows of the stores were also broken.

I stood in front of the Institute of Architectural Design and I took out the mobile telephone to call my family. I told my grandfather happily, "I am safe." But suddenly there was a loud sound of a gun shot at the intersection with Youth Road less than 10 meters away. I jumped, and my grandfather was also scared by the situation. He asked if I was coming back. I am stubborn. If I am the type to be scared to leave on account of a disturbance, I would not have chosen to come to Lhasa where I did not know anyone. To put it another way, when I decided to come to Lhasa, I had already thought about the various possibilities.

So I gave my grandfather an answer that was disappointing to him. I told him not to worry and I hung up the telephone. From a taxi across the street, my Tibetan friend waved at me and asked me to go and drink tea. I went through the spot where the gunshot occurred and got into the taxi. I thought that I would be the same way with my Tibetan friends as before and not changed as a result of March 14. But as I sat in the Tibetan sweet tea house, I realized that everything has changed. The Tibetan service workers ignored the Han people completely and they only chatted with their Tibetan friends. Even worse, the Tibetans were swapping rumors and lies that completely distorted the facts. It was absurd that anyone can believe these bare-faced lies and regard them as the truth.
The reason why they believe that these were the facts is very simply that the tellers were Tibetans! They said, If you can't trust a Tibetan, who can you trust? In any case, as long as it is a Tibetan, they you must help him no matter what the rights or wrongs of the matter are! Among their beliefs, there are no rights or wrongs and there is only ethnicity! There was no way for us to communicate!

My Tibetan friend dined with her Tibetan friends. After they ordered, my friend raised some doubt about those slurs against the Han people. Her friend stood up and yelled at her: "Are you Tibetan? How can you help out the Han?" Then she walked out. Later, after her other Tibetan friends, I went to drink tea with her. But before I even took a sip, she uttered a slur about the Han people. I was so angry that I imitated her friend: I stood up and walked out.

Among my beliefs, the most important thing is about knowing the rights and wrongs, which is completely different from the Tibetan belief that their ethnicity is the most important thing. I felt that there was no need to debate with them anymore. Saying anything more would only end in a shouting match. I chose to leave so that we can cool down. At the time, I really did not want to say another word to her even though we used to be able to tell each other everything!

I really cannot believe that someone like her who has received higher education and traveled all around the country can still hold such narrow-minded views! I cannot believe that their perceptions and judgments are circumscribed completely within the words "Tibetan people" while willing to ignore what they have personally seen or heard!

I was saddened, I was pained, I was immensely angry! I was even more angry than having been inexplicably cursed out with foul language by the Tibetan conductor that I know on the bus this afternoon! All my confidence in thinking that the Han and Tibetan people can never reach this stage has evaporated.

I walked down the street expressionlessly. I thought about all those deaths that I heard about. I remembered the devastation at the places that I usually visited. I wanted to cry out aloud: "Where is justice? Where is fairness? Where is the law?"

What is kind-heartedness? What is morality? What is warm-heartedness? What is intimacy? What is justice? What is fairness? Ha ha, they are all dog's fart! Yesterday Tibet TV and Lhasa TV showed how people were doused with gasoline and burned to death, Hui children coming out of school had their ears cut off and set on fire, the shops of Han and Hui people were vandalized and set on fire, the banks were vandalized, the schools were vandalized, the hotels were vandalized, the many places that the Han, Tibetan and Hui people lived were destroyed along with our peaceful and happy lives. Is this the so-called beautiful and sacred Tibet? Is this how the Tibetans treat life? These lamas would normally not even want to step on an ant, but they now show their indifferent and cruel faces. What can we say? What can we do?

I cannot believe that in the face of these ironclad facts that they can still say without blinking their eyes, "The owners burned down their own stores, the injured inflicted wounds on themselves and everything was a frame-up!"

I wish that this was just a dream. I did not really see the blackened rubble, I did not hear about the deaths and I did not know anything. I was just dreaming all that. When I wake up, everything will be the same as before. I can still sit down with my Tibetan friends in the sweet tea house to chat and joke. I can still walk around with my backpack at Barkor Street, Chomsyikhand, Youth Road ...

Sleep then. When I wake up, none of this will have happened. But when I came to work today, everything was just like in the dream. All the inner calm was just a façade; all the smiles were repressed pains; all the numbness is just the irretrievably lost memories of the once beautiful Lhasa; all the indifference is just the sorrow of never being able to look at Lhasa in the same way again; all the light winds and clouds are the grimness at the thought that the Hans and Tibetans can never go back again.

I really did not want to come out and go to work. I did not want to face everything after March 14. But coming back after the trauma, the delight in seeing colleagues again is still stronger than the other
emotions. So I had to tell them how I made it back to my place. I had to tell them how I spent the
days when I was supposed to stay indoors. I had to thank my colleagues for their concern when they
could not contact me. I had to hear what happened to them too.

My colleagues did not dare to come home on March 14, so they hid in the warehouse of the Institute of
Architectural Design. Men and women slept there with the wares without daring to utter a word in
case those crazy Tibetan young men hear them and use violence.

One of my colleagues made a harrowing escape from knife-wielding Tibetan young men.
Another colleague went back to the dormitory on a bicycle, and received two strong slaps in the face.
An employee at the Institute of Architectural Design was stabbed by a Tibetan who charged into the
place.

Those colleagues not staying at the company dormitory returned to their rented place and banded with
the other Han people to form their own defense team. They armed themselves with kitchen knives,
metal pipes, rocks and wooden sticks and guarded their home. They passed through the days and
nights nervously. The Chomsyikhand wholesale market where we went to buy daily items for the
company was burned out and quite unrecognizable.

The Direct Line Eyeglass Company, which was our competitor, was burned to the point where not even
the store sign was visible.

At the Yizun Clothing Store on Beijing Middle Road, several service workers were burned to death
inside.

The Dicos restaurant at Barkhor Street was burned to the ground.

The Tianhai Night Market, which is the most famous night market in Lhasa, was burned to the ground.
The shops at the western suburb customs office were burned. A Han man on the motorcycle was killed
by rock-wielding rioters.

On the night of March 16, the Hui people gathered together and attacked the Barkhor Street Tibetan
area to take revenge against the Tibetans for burning their shops and mosques as well as cutting off
the ears of Hui children.

The price of food in Lhasa was rising; when Han and Tibetan people go to shop for stuff, the Han pays
this much and the Tibetan pays that much, so that the Han are paying less.

How many carloads of people were sent to the hospital today?

...

There was so much to talk about that we practically ran out of saliva. By that time, it was 4:30pm
and the boss lady came over to say that there was trouble in the western suburbs and the Xuexin
village. Therefore, we were closing early.

So we closed shop and went home. We were very, very nervous. We said goodbye to each other with
the sense that we may never see each other again.

Fortunately, I made it back to my place safely once more.

I will have to work tomorrow. They said that things are fine and there won't be any trouble.
I wish.

But many things can no longer be as before, and I cannot say that everything is alright. All those of
us who lived through the March 14 disturbances will bear a psychological scar for the rest of our lives.
I cannot forgive those people! I cannot forgive those criminals for destroying our homes, for
destroying our lives, for destroying the brotherhood of Han and Tibetan, for destroying our trust, for
destroying our ability to sit down chat at the sweet tea house and for destroying my tender love for
Lhasa. I think that my sorrow and chagrin right now is like that between the 'greens' and 'blues' in
Taiwan. I look around but I cannot find any neutralizing candy or pain-killing medicine. The year 2008, the day March 14, Lhasa, how can I forget?

(March 22, 2008)
Concerning <How Can I Forget Lhasa, March 14?>, I want to clarify that I wrote this not to inflame ethnic hostility. Rather, I was describing my experience during the March 14 disturbance. I wrote about what I saw and heard around me. This was just my subjective knowledge. It does not represent the totality of the disturbances, and it does not represent the truth about the disturbances. The readers should not misunderstand, especially about all Tibetans being bad people. I apologize if my words somehow conveyed that impression and that would be a failure of my writing skills. I apologize and accept your criticisms.

Dear friends, I ask you to believe that most of the Tibetans including the Dalai Lama are still the gentle and sincere people before. I heard that on March 14, many Tibetans hid Han people inside their homes so that the rioters cannot hurt them. When they did that, they were running huge risks for themselves. I am sorry that that I did not disclose those details in a timely manner and that led to some misunderstanding. I only learned about these aspects yesterday. I ask you to tell all your friends and families that not all Tibetans are bad people! You must make it clear! Thanks!