Dear media friends,

The reports from Tibet concerning increasing restrictions of movement of foreign journalists (Canadian and UK reporters were detained for a while in Amdo, 25 journalists deported to Hong Kong, plus - I am told - James Miles, the only western journalist in Lhasa, has now been escorted out; his permit was to expire on Wednesday) are very alarming and foretell of a period when information will become even harder to come by.

My colleague, Rebecca Novick, an Angelino currently based in Dharamsala India, was able to record an extraordinary interview with a group of monks who had recorded cell phone calls with eyewitnesses in the Amdo region of Tibet. She’s got it all on tape and you can read her account below.

Please let me know if you are interested in airing any or part of this interview. The Huffington Post has already agreed to post an excerpt online. And PLEASE forward this to any other journalists or outlets you think might be interested. This is an important story and this is the time tell it.

Christal

WE'RE ONLY HUMAN: Cell phone conversations give dramatic accounts of the reality on the ground in Tibet

Lately, Dharamsala—a North Indian town that houses thousands of exiled Tibetans—has been a hot bed of activity, with daily sympathy protests for the Tibetans in their homeland. I had been filming and recording a number of these events for various news media. On the evening of March 16th, I was approached by a small group of young Tibetan monks in the main courtyard just outside the Dalai Lama’s residence. Their faces were tense and earnest. They clearly wanted to talk.

My translator told me that they were from Kirti monastery in Amdo in North Eastern Tibet. A press release had been circulated that morning saying that 2,500 monks of Kirti monastery and 8,000 lay people in Amdo Ngaba, Ngaba county in Sichuan province, had engaged in a spontaneous demonstration. The Chinese military had used tear gas to break up the crowd and truckloads of troops had been sent into the area.

The monks in Dharamsala, all in their twenties, were receiving cell phone calls from people in Amdo, giving eyewitness accounts of these and other dramatic events, and saving these calls on their phones. We sat together on some concrete steps while one monk, whose name was Lobsang*, played me a conversation he had had with a man
from Amdo only one hour before. The man on the other end of the phone had a
desperate tone to his voice, and even though I couldn't understand the words, the
emotion was clearly communicated. Afterwards, my translator, Kyizom, told me what
had been said.

"How many people were killed today?" Lobsang asked. The man replied, "Eight
people...two monks, one girl and five lay people. They just shot two more, right now.
Three of them were students from Amdo Ngapa middle school."

The recording ended abruptly and Lobsang slipped the cell phone back inside his
maroon robes. "I'm really worried about what is going on in Tibet," he said, "Now that
monks and laypeople are all rising together, the Chinese might kill even more." He
had family in Amdo and I asked if he was concerned for their safety. "I'm not just
concerned about my family. All Tibetans are like my family," he said.

Another monk, Tashi, was concerned that the Amdo demonstrations might turn
violent. "The Chinese are shooting people who are protesting peacefully, and the
Tibetans might feel they have no choice but to resort to violence to defend
themselves. Non-violence is ingrained in Tibetans—it's part of our way of life. But we
are also human."

Tenzing, who spoke some English, explained to me that like in Lhasa the people of
Amdo Ngapa have a high degree of political awareness and because of this the
Chinese are constantly monitoring Tibetans there. "Since childhood I was raised in an
atmosphere of tension and suspicion, and with constant surveillance. All the Tibetans
in Amdo hope and pray that His Holiness the Dalai Lama will return one day. This is
always in our minds, eating away at us. These days this feeling has burst out of our
hearts. We just can't contain it any longer."

Lobsang was eager to explain that the protests in Tibet are not being organized by the
Dalai Lama but were occurring on the initiative of Tibetans in Tibet. What we're seeing
in Tibet, he told me, is nothing compared to what we would see if the Dalai Lama had
actually called for Tibetans to rise up against the Chinese. "If the Dalai Lama asked
Tibetans to protest, believe me, all Tibetans would rise spontaneously," he said.
"There is no doubt about this."

As we were talking, Lobsang's cell phone rang again. The call was from Tibet. He bent
his head down low to hear the voice through the crackling static. Kyizom told me that
the man on the phone had just heard that twenty people had been shot on a bridge.
The line went dead. Lobsang tried to call back, but couldn't. "It's very difficult to
contact people in Tibet, he said. "Many of the calls don't go through, but we do our
best."

The phone rang again and Kyizom translated while the man on the other end spoke
fast, obviously aware that the connection could be lost any moment. "Around 10,000
people joined in the protest today at Kirti monastery. Some of them were arrested
and taken to prison. The people demanded that the police release them. They refused,
and some Tibetans burnt a police car and a jailhouse. I saw fifteen bodies lying in Kirti
monastery. A lot of students from Purkyl Laptan School joined in the demonstration.
One girl and one boy were shot dead."

"Isn't he scared of talking on the phone like this? I asked, knowing that many Tibetans had reported that their phone conversations were monitored. Lobsang translated my question. "No. I'm not scared," the man replied.

Lobsang said something in Tibetan that Kyizom didn't translate. Tears were welling up in her eyes. She then continued in a halting voice. "Don't worry about me, the man is saying. Please keep calling me and I will tell you whatever I can."

"I will pray that you stay safe," said Lobsang and hung up the phone.

Everyone was quiet for a moment and then Tashi began to speak again. He wanted to put the destruction of property in perspective.

"What I heard was that around 7,000 Chinese soldiers surrounded the protestors at Kirti monastery and began military maneuvers. It really intimidated the people who were just standing there with a photo of the Dalai Lama and a Tibetan flag pinned to their chests. The soldiers swooped in and began brutally beating people indiscriminately and shooting into the crowd with live ammunition. So it was simply out of feelings of hopelessness and desperation that the Tibetans then destroyed the property. It wasn't pre-meditated."

The monks rolled out an impressive three-foot long glossy photo of 3,000 monks outside Kirti monastery in Tibet. "Can you get this story to the media?" they asked.

I have to admit I experienced a moment of wanting this story for myself. Here was a unique, engaging, and intimate side to the events in Tibet, beyond the statistics and images that couldn't begin to capture the intensity of what was really going on. Happily, it was only a moment. And then I and my cameraman husband began brainstorming how to share the monks' story with the world.

Dharamsala was filled with journalists from all over the world who had arrived to cover the Dalai Lama's press conference. I had met a number of them from CNN, ABC, BBC, Reuters, as well as representatives of the Indian press. I began a cell phone campaign of my own and called them all to tell them what I'd heard. I told the monks that they should prepare a press conference for the following afternoon at Dharamsala's Kirti monastery.

The next afternoon, every one of the one hundred chairs in the hall at Kirti was filled with reporters from the world’s biggest news agencies and representatives of various NGO's. The monks had turned into media pros overnight and had set up a sound system with speakers and microphones. But this was a different kind of press conference from the ones you usually see around here. Instead of high government officials, here were ordinary monks with a story to tell.

In front of the reporters, Lobsang called a man in Tibet who had been told about the press conference and was well aware of the risks he was taking in speaking this way. He described huge movements of Chinese troops into his hometown. He also filled in
more details of the previous day's events. He had watched through a window while Chinese police shot all the people who had been arrested. The Tibetans outside had tried to claim the bodies of the dead and there had been a struggle between Tibetans and soldiers. Eventually, the Tibetans managed to take five bodies out of the jailhouse, and had burned it to the ground. "Thirty people are missing," he said. "The hospitals were refusing treatment for the protestors. Three people died while they were waiting to be seen." The hospital workers had been told that they would lose their jobs if they treated the protestors, he explained.

It was Monday, March 17th, the date that Chinese authorities had given as the deadline for protestors to turn themselves in, claiming that they would be lenient with those who did and harsh with those who didn't. It was clear that the Tibetans in Amdo were not paying much attention to the deadline. "There are leaflets everywhere saying there will be a huge protest at midnight tonight," the man on the cell phone told Lobsang. "I'm ready to join any demonstration. I am ready to die if need be."

After the call, all the reporters wanted to see the last dialed number as proof that the call had really been made to Tibet so Kyizom put her finger over all the digits other than the country code to protect the caller and showed it to everyone in the room.

Tibetans in Tibet have been finding it difficult to send photos and especially video, but some images are now getting out. The monks had received graphic photos of some of the bodies that had been taken into Kirti monastery —now a temporary morgue. They had put the photos on CD's and handed them out to all the reporters and also put them up on a wall for all to see. There were people with bullet holes, covered in blood, many with shocked expressions of a violent death on their faces, and some body parts that were almost unrecognizable in their mangled condition.

Later in the evening, the Kirti monks from Dharamsala received even more photos of those who had been killed by Chinese police. And that night, while they led 5,000 monks and laypeople in a candle light prayer service at the Dalai Lama's temple for those who had died in the recent unrest in Tibet, images of the victims were displayed behind them on a big screen television. One young monk who was joining in the prayers was shocked to see the body of his cousin on the screen. He hadn't known he was dead.

Even though they were in India, the monks knew that speaking to journalists could endanger their families and friends. Weren't they afraid? "The Chinese are shooting our friends, our neighbors and our families," they said. "What do we have to lose that we haven't lost already?"

It seems that the people of Amdo feel the same way. Well after the deadline the Chinese authorities imposed, thousands of Tibetans have joined fresh demonstrations in Amdo—still waving the banned Tibetan flags and displaying photos of the Dalai Lama.

*Names have been changed to protect identities

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