

**Note from J.S. Mehta (MEA)
to Indian Representatives Abroad¹**

2 April 1959

I enclose a short note giving the background leading to the present situation in Tibet for your information and guidance.

2. Subsequent events and our official policy have been clarified in the statements made by the Prime Minister in the Lok Sabha on the 23rd and 30th March, 1959. Our policy regarding the grant of asylum has also been enunciated by the Prime Minister in response to a short notice question on 30th March, 1959 (text enclosed).

Please acknowledge receipt.

THE SITUATION IN TIBET

The vast semi-circular region consisting of Kham, Amdo, Golok, Lithang and Batang were quasi-autonomous territories (sometimes referred to as Inner Tibet) and were inhabited by war-like and unruly semi-tribal people. Since 1914, these areas were supposed to be politically under the suzerainty of the Central Government of China, but owed religious allegiance to the Dalai Lama. With the impact of Chinese Communist occupation in the wake of advance towards Tibet, heavy taxes and, to some extent, under the influence of the anti-Chinese Mimang leadership, the Khampas revolted against the Chinese in 1956. This rebellion in turn provoked strong repressive action by the Chinese including aerial bombing, destruction of monasteries and the displacement of a large number of the settled population. In 1957, the Dalai Lama, on his return

¹ Letter from Deputy Secretary, MEA. *Revolt in Tibet. Dalai Lama's Arrival in India 1959*, Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, pp. 47-48.

from India, was reported to have pleaded to the Chinese for clemency towards the Khampas.

Displaced from their homeland and somewhat encouraged by the reported sympathy of the Dalai Lama, between January and March 1958, about 50,000 to 60,000 Khampas and some Gholapkas migrated to various parts of outer Tibet, nearly 4,000 of them going to Lhasa. The Chinese authorities, though outwardly conciliatory, created apprehension of possible arrest and seizure by various security precautions and insistence on identity papers which were imposed exclusively on these Khampa refugees. Whether it was the apprehension of a Chinese swoop or a genuine desire not to endanger Lhasa and the person of Dalai Lama, the Khampas started leaving Lhasa in small batches at the beginning of June 1958. Smarting against the Chinese for the damage to their homeland and true to their warlike tradition, they started preparing for an armed clash to settle accounts with the Chinese.

An Amdo-Khampa United Party, pledged to fight the Chinese, became the nucleus of the resistance movement. Mules and arms were purchased at exorbitant prices and volunteer groups from Central, Eastern Tibet as well as from those resident in India congregated in one or two well-defined areas, particularly in the north and south-east of Lhasa. According to reliable reports, 13,000 armed Khampas concentrated in a small triangular area in the Lokha region (south-east of Lhasa) alone.

The Chinese authorities in Tibet endeavoured to control this Khampa threat through the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan Kashag. In August, they urged the Dalai Lama to use Tibetan troops to suppress Khampas, but the suggestion was turned down for fear of troops deserting and joining the Khampas. A letter was despatched to the Khampa leaders and later a delegation of Tibetan officials and representatives of the monasteries was proposed to be sent; but even though wide publicity was given, it never actually undertook the mission. Since the Khampas had divided their forces, in September, three separate missions were sent to Khampa strongholds; but for one reason or another, they proved equal failures. At

the same time, serious clashes between Chinese and Khampa guerillas, resulting in casualties and losses on both sides, occurred at periodical intervals in various parts of Tibet. The Chinese took protective measures to strengthen their garrisons, placed fresh restrictions on Tibetan traders and imposed almost a complete ban on the movement of pilgrims to India. They suspected that Tibetan officials were sympathetic with Khampa activities. The Dalai Lama, apprehensive of the consequences of continued Khampa defiance and of Chinese suspicion of half-heartedness, in December 1958, appointed a Committee of 62 led by a member of the Cabinet most trusted by the Chinese to deal with the Khampa problem. Large Chinese reinforcements were brought to the Sikang region (East of Tibet) and heavy casualties have been reported amongst the inhabitants in this area. There have been reports of 4 million Chinese (Han) being settled in these comparatively fertile valleys.

Meanwhile, in Central Tibet, the winter months were utilised by the Khampas to gather strength and consolidate their complete hold over a vast area lying between the south bank of Tsangpo and Bhutan-India border extending eastward from Nagartse (near Gyantse) upto Lho Dzong. The Khampa rebels took upon themselves the title of "Voluntary force for the defence of religion" and seemed to have re-established contact with the anti-Chinese Mimang party. Food supplies and arms were acquired by fair purchase and expropriation from the local population. Estimates of the Khampa force vary from 15 to 25,000. They are equipped with small arms, but probably have limited supplies of arms and ammunition. There have been reports, not confirmed indisputably, of an air strip having been built at Trigu where K.M.T. planes are alleged to have dropped ammunition and equipment.

In spite of the fact that the Chinese were treading warily in Tibet and even postponed their programme of "civil reform" in 1956, there was a general feeling among Tibetans that the Chinese had not observed either the letter or the spirit of the 17-Point Agreement of 1951 guaranteeing Tibetan autonomy in internal and religious affairs. Nevertheless, until the

recent trouble, there was an apprehension amongst responsible elements that the violent course of action adopted by the Khampas would only endanger the position of the Dalai Lama and what remained of Tibet's own way of life. The invitation issued last November for the Dalai Lama to visit Peking, though declined, did however increase the anxiety for his future safety. The cancellation of the Prime Minister's proposed visit to Lhasa apparently also added to the sense of despair about the prospect of being able to preserve Tibetan autonomy and the fabric of her institutions.

The recent trouble in Lhasa started when it was rumoured that the Dalai Lama had been invited to lunch and advised not to bring any personal armed guards with him. It is reported that as many as 30,000 people gathered to prevent the Dalai Lama from accepting an invitation which may have resulted in his being taken prisoner. The reported danger to the person of Dalai Lama provoked an uprising in which obviously all caution was abandoned and the people openly demonstrated against the Chinese authority in Tibet. These recent events seemed