

China: alarming new surveillance, security in Tibet

Restrictions tightened on Tibetans despite lack of threat

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The Chinese government's announcement that it will expand a pervasive new security system throughout the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) despite an already heavy security presence and little evidence of violent threats to the state raises grave concerns about threats to human rights of this intrusive monitoring across the region. Officials announced the system's expansion in the annual TAR work report, which was released on 7 February 2013.

Official documents describe the new system, known as "grid" (Tib: drwa ba, Ch: wangge) management, as designed to improve public access to basic services. But the system also significantly increases surveillance and monitoring, particularly of "special groups" in the region — former prisoners and those who have returned from the exile community in India, among others. Expansion of the grid system, alongside the construction across Tibet of over 600 "convenience police-posts" with high-tech equipment to monitor daily life, and increasingly active volunteer security groups known as "Red Armband Patrols" (Tib: dpung rtag dmar po) in 2012, means that surveillance is now a pervasive part of life across the region.

"Chinese authorities should dismantle this Orwellian 'grid' system, which has been imposed while the government continues to avoid addressing popular grievances," said Sophie Richardson, China director. "Its purpose appears to be surveillance and control, and it encroaches on Tibetans' rights to freedom of expression, belief, and association."

This development and other recent security increases expand even further a longstanding practice of carrying out security policies much more restrictively in Tibet than in most of the rest of China.

In January 2012, following instructions from China's then-President Hu Jintao, the TAR government announced that it would implement the grid system, first introduced in 2007 in Beijing, as the key to "social stability maintenance" in Tibet, thus "putting a dragnet into place to maintain stability." On 17 February 2013, Yu Zhengsheng, Standing Committee member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee

and the top official in China in charge of nationality policy, confirmed that the system should be put into effect throughout the region to form “nets in the sky and traps on the ground,” an indication that the system is primarily designed for surveillance and control.

The new grid system grows out of the nationwide “social stability maintenance” (Ch: *weiwen*) policy drive, and establishes a new sub-local layer to the administrative system in urban and rural areas across China. According to one Chinese scholar, the grid system is designed to ensure that “information is proactively gathered about people, events, and things so as to build up a database of urban components and events ... through which relevant departments and work units can proactively uncover problems in a timely manner.”

Reports in local-language media in Tibet refer to the security function of these offices but also emphasize the role of these staff in delivering social services, such as providing employment, medical care, and schooling for the children of migrants and local residents, saying they are “to create conditions of effective social management and participation in a harmonious society and a good situation for all.”

The system is staffed mostly by civilians rather than government officials, usually with a Communist Party member in each office, to manage surveillance and control operations. Party membership in Tibet requires articulating opposition to, among other things, increased Tibetan autonomy, independence, or the Dalai Lama, thus raising concerns that political criteria rather than violations of law may serve as the basis of surveillance, searches, or detentions.

In the new grassroots level of urban administration, each “neighbourhood” or “community” area in towns will be divided into three or more grid units. At least eight pilot units were set up in Lhasa, the regional capital, in April 2012, and in September were declared to have “achieved notable results.” On 9 October, the regional party secretary stated that because “the Lhasa practice has fully proved the effectiveness of implementing grid management to strengthen and innovate social management,” the system should be made universal in “the towns, rural areas, and temples” of the TAR.

Published instructions for “stability maintenance” require special monitoring of “critical groups.” These include former prisoners, nuns, and monks who are not resident in a monastery or nunnery, former monks and nuns who have been expelled from their institutions, Tibetans who have returned from the exile community in India, and people involved in earlier protests, according a public notice displayed in Lhasa in July 2012.

The grid offices are closely linked to “Red Armband Patrols,” which also typically include local Communist Party members. Such patrols handle traffic and low-level street management throughout China at times of extra tension, but, according to Tibetans from Lhasa who spoke with Human Rights Watch, since May 2012 these patrols have been involved in much more intrusive

actions in Tibet, including searching homes for materials relating to the Dalai Lama or other perceived indications of dissident opinion.

Searches of residences are not legal in China unless carried out by police according to legal procedures, and expanding authority to carry out such surveillance greatly increases the risk that people's privacy will be violated, or that they will be deprived of their liberty on vague or unspecified grounds.

Human Rights Watch has received detailed accounts of four home raids carried out by Red Armband Patrols attached to grass-roots offices in Lhasa searching for photographs of the Dalai Lama. In one case, in September 2012, a Tibetan woman named Choedron, about 65, from Kyire, a part of the Old City of Lhasa, was briefly detained for arguing with Red Armband Patrol members who tried to search her family's shrine room. Her son, Lobsang Dorje, 26, the owner of a shop selling mobile phones and other electronic items, was detained, severely beaten, fined, and made to sign a confession after he protested his mother's detention. In another case, volunteers belonging to a Red Armband Patrol entered the apartment of an elderly Tibetan woman in the Old City of Lhasa, searching for incriminating items. The two other cases also involved plainclothes security teams aided by volunteers searching homes in Lhasa for photographs of the Dalai Lama.

In addition, by July 2012, 676 permanent, street-side "convenience police-posts" (Ch: bian minjing wu zhan) had been set up in towns across the region. These are equipped with computers and video technology for computerized checks of people passing through on a "case-by-case" basis. Police officers who staff the posts are required to be on duty around-the-clock.

Other restrictions are being introduced in the region. Human Rights Watch has received numerous first-hand reports of Tibetans being subjected to searches and being required to pass through X-Ray scans before entering areas considered "critical" in Lhasa. In 2012 Tibetan authorities set up a "TAR Social Stability Maintenance Command" in Lhasa, and established "Stability Maintenance Work Groups" at every level of the administration, responsible for exercising control over online and phone communications.

Stability maintenance teams and the new street-side police-posts are maintaining records of all vehicles entering the city or area. In some areas, official media reports said, the new police-posts are required to keep records of "those going outside the locality" and to register each of them individually, with some checkpoints required to provide "security checking and proper registering of the floating population" as well as the details of "every single vehicle and individual." In August, in a move presumably intended to deter incidents of self-immolation, authorities announced that people would have to give their real names to buy gasoline for vehicles or other uses.

Standard policing procedures throughout China involve uniformed police patrolling streets in every city, but since 2008 armed paramilitary units as well as police have been stationed round-the-clock at each corner of the Tibetan quarter of Lhasa. A 21 December article in the official media showed

photographs of a Red Armband Patrol operating just outside Lhasa, although the patrols were introduced in May 2012 supposedly to provide security just for the run-up to the 18th Party Congress, which concluded in mid-November. Leaders in the region have since called for these security activities to continue into 2013.

“China’s effort to impose pervasive surveillance on every street is not likely to make Tibet safer,” Richardson said. “But the increased surveillance will surely increase pressure in an already tense region, even while the Tibetan people are still waiting for Chinese attention to rampant violations of their rights.”

Background:

The situation in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) and the neighboring Tibetan autonomous areas within Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan province, remains tense following the massive crackdown on popular protests that swept the plateau in 2008. Chinese security forces maintain a heavy presence and the authorities tightly restrict access and travel to Tibetan areas, particularly for foreign journalists and visitors. Tibetans suspected of being critical of political, religious, cultural, or economic state policies are targeted on charges of “separatism.”

The government is building what it describes as a “new socialist countryside” by relocating and rehousing up to 80 percent of the TAR population, and requiring most pastoralists and nomads to move to permanent locations. In 2012 it also placed almost all Tibetan monasteries under the direct control of government officials who will be permanently stationed there.

The Chinese government has given no indication that it would accommodate the aspirations of Tibetan people for greater autonomy, even within the narrow confines of the country’s autonomy law on ethnic minority areas. Since the first recorded case of a self-immolation in Tibet on 27 February 2009, 109 Tibetans have self-immolated, 82 of them in 2012 alone. At least 89 of those who self-immolated have died.

The Grid Management System

The grid management system grows out of “social stability maintenance” (Ch: *weiwen*), a nationwide drive to prevent protest and unrest that has been especially prominent since 2007. Over the last two years, that drive has been extended to the grass-roots level across China, and officials are now required to seek out and prevent potential unrest at the earliest stages by “nipping

sources of instability in the bud,” according to official statements, to “catch [incidents] early, catch them when they are small, catch them quickly, and catch them completely.”

Grid management, part of a broad governmental objective to enable it to carry out “social management” alongside “stability maintenance,” is usually presented in the press as a way of providing better services to residents. In February 2011, Xinhua reported that “localities across the country are strengthening social management innovation and utilising gridded management to improve the service level of social management. With residence management as the core, management effectiveness will be increased.”

The grid system, introduced in Beijing in 2007, adds a new layer below China’s formal administrative system, which consists of government offices at the national, provincial, prefectural, county, and township levels. Cities and towns in China are divided into sub-districts, earlier called “street offices” (Tib: khrom gzhung don gchod khang, Ch: jiedao banshichu), township-level administrations run by government officials. The sub-districts are further divided into “neighbourhoods,” renamed “communities” (Tib: sde khul, Ch: shequ) since 1999, managed by semi-official “mass organisations” known as “neighbourhood committees” or “residents’ committees” (Tib: sa gnas u yon lhan khang, Ch: jumin weiyuanhui).

The new grid system divides the neighborhoods and communities into smaller units, each with a team of at least five administrative and security staff. In some Chinese cities the new grid units are as small as 5 or 10 households, each with a “grid captain” and a delegated system of collective responsibility.

According to a study by a Chinese scholar, the grid system is designed to enhance coordination between the various government agencies that manage the population by giving them access to information about people at a level below that reached by the residents’ committees in neighborhoods and communities. “Grid management” is specifically intended to facilitate information-gathering by enabling disparate sources into a single, accessible and digitized system for use by officials.

In January 2012, the TAR government, citing instructions issued by then-President Hu Jintao, announced that a grid management system would be created in Tibetan towns as a priority, with its primary purpose being the extension of security operations to the grass-roots level to fight the “Dalai clique.” Grid management was listed as the third of the “Ten Measures for the Maintenance of Stability” that had to be achieved in Tibet. “In order to [achieve] the primary goal of stability management,” Tibet’s Party Secretary Chen Quanguo told Tibet officials, “We must implement the urban grid management system. The key elements are focusing on ... really implementing grid management in all cities and towns, putting a dragnet into place to maintain stability.”

The process of “social management ‘gridisation’” (Ch: “wange hua” shehui

guanli) is ongoing in Tibet. TAR authorities initiated eight grid units in two inner Lhasa neighbourhoods (Ch: Chengguanqu) in April 2012. On 18 September, this “pilot stage” was declared by the party secretary of the inner Lhasa city area to be “in full swing” and was said to have “achieved notable results,” including “storing nearly 10,000 basic data and collecting hundreds of pieces of information about conditions of the people.” At least three more units were functioning in Lhasa by October. Leadership statements in October indicated that the system will be extended to the 51 neighborhoods or communities that currently make up the eight sub-districts and four townships (Ch: xiang) of the inner city area of Lhasa (Ch: Chengguanqu), and throughout the TAR.

As with the offices of neighbourhoods or “communities,” most of the staff in grid offices are not government employees or officials but ordinary citizens, and, at least in Tibet, many are Communist Party members. Grid offices in Lhasa appear to use a personnel system known as “1+5+X”, which means each unit has a basic team of five staff led by a party secretary, with links to police, military and other agencies. The offices are designed to be part of an integrated “long-set platform” of government, party and citizen agencies that are intended to provide “a mass prevention and control network to create stable units and a harmonious environment for residents of sub-districts and communities,” and each grid unit is designed to work in tandem with “grassroots cadres, sub-police stations (Ch: paichusuo), coordinators and managers of the floating population, public security personnel, and 24-hour patrols during major holidays.”

In the Barkor (Ch: Bakuo) sub-district of Lhasa, for example, a neighbourhood committee called Lubu (Ch: Lugu) has been divided into five grid units, each with seven personnel — an administrator, a party branch secretary and assistant, and four others to oversee mediation, police work, religious affairs, and general supervision. The neighbouring community of Ramoche (Tib: Ra mo che, Ch.: Remoqi) has been sub-divided into three “grids” or “grid units,” as has the community of Peling (Tib: Dpal gling, Ch: Bailin). Peling’s Grid Unit 2 includes some 20 residential compounds in the old city of Lhasa and is run by a staff of 10, all Tibetans. Two of them are leaders, another is responsible for security (Tib: bde srung), two handle policing, one covers religious affairs, another oversees the “floating population,” and the others manage the grid, oversee market stalls, and mediate disputes.

The primary work of the grid offices, judging by a public notice displayed prominently in the Peling area of Lhasa since at least July 2012, is to establish “Basic Grid Unit Information.” According to the notice, the office is required to identify the number of people and residences in their area; the number who require social services such as the elderly and the disabled; and the number who belong to “special groups.” The special groups are: released prisoners, “nuns and monks on the move,” drug addicts, “returning people” (Ch: huiliu ren yuan — probably a reference to Tibetans who have returned from the exile community in India), “people to monitor after the 14 March incident” (a reference to a major protest in Lhasa in 2008), “people dismissed from

monasteries,” members of the forbidden religious group Falun Gong, and “other individuals who require special attention.” These “special groups” appear to be the “critical sectors,” or “key persons” in the TAR, the control of whom is described in official documents as the most important task or objective of stability maintenance work in Tibet, second only to establishing teams of cadres in villages and monasteries. This indicates that information-collection and surveillance are primary functions for the grid units.

The 676 new police-posts established throughout Tibet in 2012 as part of the stability maintenance drive are described in top-level government statements, attributed to Hu Jintao himself, as a crucial element of the new grid system. These posts are to facilitate coordination of information and operations between the security services and the semi-official grid units. Previously, the lowest level of police operation was a paichusuo or sub-police station, at the same level as a sub-district or township, but the new police-posts are at village level or lower.

In Tibet they are praised in official statements as “promoting the benefits of maximum convenience and zero distance, increasing harmonious factors and minimizing the factors of disharmony” as a result of their proximity to grass-roots communities. They are described as “constituting the mesh node to provide a platform for the realisation of grid management” and “ensuring total coverage of the urban grid management linking the urban and village levels.” The new system thus involves both uniformed police and non-uniformed staff having for the first time permanent offices at the level of the grid unit.

Stability Maintenance

Within Tibet, the underlying policy for current security work has been laid out in the “six key tasks” of “social stability maintenance” for the TAR. These are: to establish stability maintenance teams in each monastery and village; to control “critical areas” and “critical sectors” or “key persons;” to manage the “floating population” and crowds; to construct local street-side police-posts “to ensure total coverage of the grid linking the urban and village levels” and to catch “sudden incidents;” to have full management of new communication technologies to improve capacity for pre-emption and prediction; and to strengthen the capacity for emergency response by improving the forecasting of unexpected incidents.

In some official reports, the number of “key tasks” is given as 8 or 10, and in others even more tasks are identified. These include “scientifically guiding public opinion” through “the management of new media such as the internet and cell phones,” an apparent reference to using paid staff to monitor Internet discussions and write pro-government comments. Another task is to carry out political education of teachers and students to maintain stability on campuses. A third is the strict management of tourist sites (possibly to prevent political protests by foreigners), while another requires increased security controls at

water, fuel and gas facilities, perhaps because of fears of sabotage.

In October, Tibetan officials were reminded by their leaders that the underlying national strategy for stability maintenance was to “achieve early detection and early punishment, and conscientiously eliminate unstable and dangerous factors at the germination stage.” This time the list of “critical tasks” included “strengthening information and intelligence work to achieve in practical terms smart ears and clear eyes [so as] to gain the initiative.” The focus of stability maintenance work since then has been on improving information-gathering and surveillance, and TAR officials were instructed to exercise more rigorous controls over the use of telephone lines, cell phones, the Internet, and micro-blogs, and to ban any anonymous use.

The “Stability Maintenance Work Groups” established at each administrative level in Tibet were required to be staffed around the clock in the five months leading up to the Party Congress in November and during this period were not allowed to take any holidays, or business or study trips. Similar rules had been imposed on officials in Tibet during earlier months in 2012, in the lead up to the March 14 anniversary of unrest four years earlier, and again during the month-long Sagadawa Festival in May, treated as a high-risk period because of a protest by a group of nuns during that festival in 1991. Tibetan officials were therefore kept on a heightened alert for eleven months during 2012.

Increasing the Size and Reach of the Party in Tibet

In the TAR, the authorities have faced a shortage of personnel to staff the new grass-roots administrative offices. Most government officials or cadres are reluctant to work at the village or grass-roots level since these positions lack prestige, and the authorities have therefore turned to local-level party members, along with ordinary citizens who are not part of the civil service. As a result, the construction of the grid system has been paralleled by a major effort to increase party membership.

According to official statistics, the number of Party members in the TAR grew three times as much between 2006 and 2012 as in China as a whole, increasing by 46.5 percent in the TAR compared with 14.6 percent nationwide. In the same period, the number of these party members who were working as officials at township or village level in the TAR increased by 59 percent.

The total number of party members in Tibet is now 230,000, of whom some 80 are Tibetans, with nearly half coming from the rural areas. By the end of 2012, 7.67 percent of the population in the TAR were party members, compared with 6.23 percent of the population nationwide. In the same period, the number of party secretaries and party officials below county level increased by 46,000 or 58.75 percent; there are now 79,000 grass-roots party officials at county and township level.

At the same time, the authorities in the TAR have increased the number of party organizations at the local level, providing them with the ability to manage local populations at a level that has not generally been reached by the police or by government since the end of the Maoist era. Since 2006, 12,800 party organisations have been formed at the local level in Tibet, in addition to about 1,500 party cells established in the last year by cadres stationed within each monastery in Tibet.

Party officials have expressed concern about the lack of skills among local-level leaders, likely a reference to village members with only basic education, or to elderly people and retirees who staffed such projects in the recent past. As a result an additional drive is under way in the TAR to recruit local-level party secretaries and staff from among young entrepreneurs, recent university graduates, and former military personnel. These are selected for their abilities as entrepreneurs and their “clear achievements in maintaining social stability and encouraging development.”

But party officials have also been told that to fill these positions they “must nurture, select and make use of outstanding Tibetan and other minority cadres, and excellent Chinese cadres with long-term service in Tibet, who are politically reliable, who uphold unity of nationalities, who oppose single-mindedly oppose splittism, and who dare to struggle against the Dalai Clique.” Specific orders were issued in Tibet barring anyone from these positions if they have relatives with prison records, have travelled to India to get religious teachings from the Dalai Lama, or have allowed their children to study in exile schools in India.

The party recently awarded 30 million yuan (US\$4.83 million) to some 2,900 party members in the TAR who have “contributed significantly to opposing splittism (Ch: fandui fenlie) and to stability maintenance work, and have experienced [financial] difficulties.”

By August, party branches had been established in all of the 39 communities in the urban part of the inner city district of Lhasa, supplementing the party cells or committees already in place within each of the “residents’ committees” that run the neighborhoods or communities. By that time, 679 of the 2,341 party members in the inner city area of Lhasa were grassroots-level members, and suitably qualified recruits were being sought from among them to work as grass-roots officials to assist 65 party members and government officials from higher-level offices delegated to work with the neighbourhood committees “to strengthen the front-line struggle against separatism.” A much greater number will be needed to staff the new grid offices that are below those committees.

The increase in the number of local-level party members and party employees working in grass-roots level offices in Tibet, and their role in the parallel volunteer security patrols, gives the party and the government extraordinary access to information about individuals. These numbers mean that social management at the lowest levels of society, particularly security and surveillance, is often in the hands of ordinary civilians or party members rather than government employees or uniformed police, who are under international human rights standards obliged to uphold the law in a neutral manner. This

situation is set to increase once the grid system is introduced across the TAR.

Red Armband Patrols

Semi-official, non-uniformed teams known as “Red Armband Patrols” (Tib: dpung rtag dmar po) are often seen in China, and 1.4 million “security volunteers” were deployed in Beijing to provide such patrols and other forms of security in the run-up to the Party Congress in 2012. But the security volunteers in other parts of the country usually only monitor activities in streets and public areas, and do not have the authority to enter or search homes.

Red Armband Patrols were formed in towns and villages across Tibet in 2012, believed to be the first time they have been used there in the post-Mao era. They first appeared in media reports in Tibet on 4 May 2012, as part of the preparations for the November Party Congress.

Their deployment reflects the new emphasis on local-level security operations, information collection, and inter-agency coordination at the grass-roots level. The patrols include local-level personnel from neighborhood committees and communities, grid unit staff, newly recruited party members from the local area, retired cadres living in the area, and higher-level cadres sent as members of ad hoc “work teams” (Tib: las don ru khag; Ch: gongzuo dui) in 2011 to boost security in the localities. A December 2012 photograph in the official Party newspaper in Tibet, Tibet Daily, was headlined, “In Tongga village, party members without official positions become the life force of the community,” indicating the primary role of political loyalists in the work of the patrol.

Official media in Tibet regularly refer to the need for searches and raids, quoting calls by leaders in Tibet for “covert and surprise” searches, but these usually refer to checks on local stability maintenance offices to ensure that the staff are not slacking. Some instructions, however, require staff to “strengthen the mass base of stability maintenance work by doing a thorough job of ascertaining the basic situation of households through doorstep interviews.” Others order them to “step up regular patrol and inspection in and around office buildings, and to step up patrol and inspection in densely populated areas and in apartment buildings along streets.”

In March 2012, the police office in Taktse county near Lhasa announced that for a two-month period it would step up ““One investigation, five searches” activities in all of its operations,” and listed the “five searches” as “searching for faults, searching for traces, searching for unseen threats, searching for gaps, searching for shadows.” On 17 October, Hao Peng, TAR Stability Maintenance commander, ordered officials to “eliminate hidden security threats at a fundamental level [and] strengthen one-by-one investigations and punishment measures.”

The searches by the Red Armband Patrols are usually presented not as security operations but as home visits carried out for educational purposes, and are related to propaganda work carried out by the party. On 1 August, Shen Pengli, a senior party official in Lhasa, called for “sending out a thousand people on visits and interviews” to “deepen” the work of “innovative social management” and “to expand the influence of party organisations” through use of the grid system. The report suggests a long-term effort to recruit more party members and ordinary people to join the Patrols and other forms of grassroots security and surveillance in Tibet.

The government carried out a large number of searches, whether by uniformed police or volunteers, in Tibet in 2012. Between April and mid-August of that year, as part of the crackdown campaign, 80,000 “items of publicity” were confiscated, according to local media reports. The nature of the items was not specified in public reports, but previous cases suggest that the term “items of publicity” probably refers to photographs or recordings of the Dalai Lama or other documents issued by exiles and their organisations.

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