



How Long do Emergencies Last? The case of Tibet

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Abstract: As the world focuses on the latest crises like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, other much older emergencies such as Tibet are ongoing. Dialogue should remain at the heart of conflict resolution while the international community must duly recognise every country.

Today we see countries across the world speak out against the Russia-Ukraine war. Many countries like the US, the UK and France, three of the Permanent Five at the UN Security Council, are unequivocal in their condemnation of what they call an invasion. Backing has been extended to Ukraine in the form of weapons and moral support by the US and other NATO member countries. While responses from the West have been strong, [major powers like China and India](#) in the East have

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remained rather neutral in approach. The war goes on and there are widespread calls for dialogue to bring the conflict to a peaceful end. At this point in the emergency, [around 7m refugees](#) have fled Ukraine.

As most of the world rushes to endorse Ukraine's right to remain free and focuses on helping Ukrainian refugees, let us not forget a similar but much older situations, such as Tibet. For centuries, Tibet was an independent country until China annexed it in 1959, upholding claims of [Tibet being an integral part of China](#) since the 13th century. Six decades later, many of the younger generation across the globe are probably unaware that Tibet ever existed as an independent country.

This post is a reminder that while crises may arise suddenly as a result of armed incursions and takeover, no one can predict when or even if the after-effects of such an emergency will subside and refugees might have the chance to return home. Tibet teaches us that the process can be very long indeed, thus emergencies and emergency response are not always short-lived.

A brief history

Until 1949, Tibet was an independent Buddhist nation with very little contact with the rest of the world. The country shared land borders with China in the north and India, Nepal, Myanmar and Bhutan to the south. The city of Lhasa was and continues to be the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region under the Chinese rule.

In 1950, the year after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese People's Liberation Army marched into Tibet, setting in motion what we can call the forcible occupation of Tibet. This sudden invasion was followed by years of turmoil under the [17 Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet](#), which China imposed, on Tibet. The agreement was [signed by the Tibetan government under duress](#), with threats of an immediate occupation of Lhasa and the prospect of takeover of the entire Tibetan State, and therefore lacks validity under international law. Nine years of resistance culminated in a failed uprising on [10 March 1959](#). The Chinese reacted to the protests with a brutal crackdown which claimed the lives of tens of thousands of Tibetans and a complete overthrow of the Tibetan government. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tibet's political and the spiritual leader, and almost 100,000 Tibetans were forced to flee into exile where they have remained ever since. [Since the emergency](#), several monasteries in Tibet have been shut down, many Tibetans have been imprisoned in the region and in 1960-62 alone an estimated 340,000 Tibetans lost their lives due to famines caused by Chinese economic reforms. In 1965, China established the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the years that followed saw imposition of martial law and suppression of demonstrations and protests in the region, including [curbs on all religions](#).

Support from the outside world?

Despite an uprising and constant resistance from the Tibetan people, Tibet eventually lost its territorial independence. But why? What was the world doing? The United Nations (UN) was in existence and the modern world had built principles of sovereignty and integrity of states. So, what happened?

Tibet was [referred to the UN](#) by the Dalai Lama when the People's Republic of China asserted its national sovereignty over Tibet in January 1950 following failed talks and the increase of Chinese troops in Tibet. The UN General Assembly condemned the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950, but despite that, around May 1951, China forced Tibetan representatives to sign the 17-point agreement. In December 1956, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution to end Chinese repression against the Tibetans. By 1958, [despite assurances](#) that it would postpone communist reforms in Tibet and halve the number of Chinese officials in Lhasa, the Chinese government broke its pledges. With important religious leaders disappearing in the region, Lhasa citizens were concerned about the Dalai Lama's safety, their suspicions aroused by the Chinese officials' behaviour towards him—Tibetans gathered round the summer palace to protect him from suspected plans for abduction. Fighting broke out in March 1959; in all, some 87,000 Tibetans were killed while several thousands fled to neighbouring countries. By the [next census](#) in the region, around 300,000 Tibetans were reported 'missing'. With minimal support from the rest of the world, the Dalai Lama arrived in India, where he was granted asylum in March 1959.

Tibet today

To date, tens of thousands of Tibetans have left their homes to achieve some measure of freedom, still clinging to the hope of returning at some stage in the future. Sixty-three years on, there are now several new generations of Tibetans trying to make the best of their lives in countries like India, Nepal and Bhutan, with no indication that they will ever be able to settle in their ancestral homeland. With around 80,000 refugees who followed him to India, the Dalai Lama leads the Tibetan government in exile from Dharamsala, India. This exiled regime currently allows all Tibetans to retain their national identity even if they have acquired citizenship of another country, thus partially equipping them to take on opportunities without completely severing ties with their identity.

However, most countries which host Tibetan refugees are non-signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and identify Tibetans as foreigners. For those in exile, lack of citizenship in their current countries of residence is a roadblock to opportunities and many fear Tibet's cause is lost for good.

The Tibetan population in India has access to many rights yet falls short of citizenship. Several countries offer education and asylum to Tibetans across the

world, but official recognition is in limbo unless they acquire a legal status in another country. While many want to remain loyal to their unique national identity as Tibetans and still hope to return to Tibet one day, they also want to explore and tap into opportunities elsewhere. This refugee situation has now been ongoing for two to three generations, many of whom still yearn for the seemingly remote possibility of complete return. How long can communities like this hold on to identities, culture, language, and ways of life and survive in an asylum state?

Extended emergencies happen, and uncertainties can linger for longer than one can imagine. When return seems impossible, resettling communities, preserving culture, language and tradition are easier said than done. Somewhere, the essence is lost, and that is the price the world pays for silence, inaction, power politics and lack of preparedness to handle the repercussions.

Way forward

[Several international bodies](#) such as the International Commission of Jurists, Amnesty International, the European Union Parliament and the UN General Assembly have condemned China's disrespect for human rights in Tibet. Yet, despite interventions, debates and member states speaking in favour of Tibet and against China's violation of human rights in the region, Tibet's status under international law remains overshadowed and is one of the most notable and longstanding [omissions of the world community, alongside many others](#). Talks have been held between the People's Republic of China and the Tibetan government in exile, but with little success. Even so, the current Central Tibetan Administration (CAT) in India is [willing to continue peace talks with China](#), should China agree, while the Dalai Lama and the CAT [advocate for increased Tibetan autonomy](#). Though the Tibetan people and administration do not accept the current status attributed to Tibet in China, they [do not seek complete independence](#) either and this has been their stand throughout. They want a genuine autonomy that will allow their way of life, perhaps within the framework of China, considering this as a way to protect and preserve Tibetan culture and identity. Protecting human rights and being prepared for emergencies both require active dialogue, compassion, and negotiation. Meanwhile, countries that host Tibetans have been graceful enough to support preserving their culture and identity while also opening doors to new opportunities. Tibet could perhaps be an example of how, despite being devoid of a country, national identity can prevail under a government in exile. Lessons from this approach can perhaps be applied to the future loss of countries due to climate change.