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TIBET ACTIVISTS HANG BANNER, BLOCKADE BEIJING'S 'CHINESE ETHNIC CULTURE PARK.' TIBETAN WOMAN DETAINED ALONG WITH SEVEN OTHERS

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***Video footage of the action and the activists' bios are available at:

<http://freetibet2008.org/globalactions/ethnicpark/>

***A daily journal of observations, interpretations and photos of events on the ground by Douglas F. Herman is available at <http://journals.worldnomads.com/dherman>

Beijing – Five Tibet activists blockaded the front entrance of the Chinese Ethnic Culture Park, at the south end of the Olympic Park, at 12:30pm today (August 13). The five were behind locked bicycles across the entrance to the park, which prominently features an exhibit of Tibetan culture. They wore t-shirts reading “Free Tibet” and held a banner reading “Tibetans Are Dying for Freedom.” A sixth activist, a Tibetan-Japanese woman, made a statement about what they were doing and the situation on the ground in Tibet. Nearby, two other activists unfurled a banner over a pedestrian bridge, which read “Free Tibet.”

Security officials immediately detained the two activists at the bridge. The six outside the park were detained after approximately five minutes. The activists are: Pema Yoko, 25, a Tibetan-Japanese woman residing in the UK; Americans Tom Cohen, 41; Martin Thomas, 36; Jennifer Kirby, 30; Jene DeSpain, 31; James Brady, 41; Bani Campozano, 20; and Jonathan Fox, 29, an Israeli-American. Their present whereabouts are unknown.

“Within moments security for the park, uniformed guards, and ‘Public Security Volunteer Guards’ ripped the banners and flags from the foreign activists,” said Douglas F. Herman, an eyewitness at the park and Board Member of the International Tibet Independence Movement (ITIM). “...I was on the scene to bear witness to the way in which the security forces reacted to non-violent direct actions that challenged China’s occupation of Tibet.” Mr. Herman had been in Beijing clandestinely reporting on the Olympics and the existence of protests calling for an end to the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which were not being reported by the Chinese controlled media. “I saw very clearly a man in a pink dress shirt,” who later turned out to be John Ray, a resident journalist for British ITN, “being knocked to the ground, and he had his shoes removed. When he tried to run he was kicked, punched, and dragged away into an adjacent building by a group of guards, volunteers and uniformed police,” reported Mr. Herman.

While the two activists on the bridge who had unfurled a yellow “Free Tibet” banner were being handcuffed Mr. Herman stated that the “Security Volunteers” popped open colorful umbrellas to block the lenses of a sea of reporters who were shooting from the ground level. Meanwhile, the remaining activists who chained themselves and their bicycles to the entrance of the park were surrounded by guards, who failed in their attempts to block the view of still and video cameras until police arrived on the scene.

“I was nearly run over by a police van as it screamed up onto the front entrance,” said Mr. Herman who then proceeded to walk directly up to the line of protestors and guards and photographed the scene. “By the time I popped off a few shots I was surrounded by guards and within the perimeter of a hastily constructed police limit line of tape.” There were several plain clothed Chinese photographing those who were documenting the event, and when one journalist who was right up on the line of protestors was knocked to the ground, Mr. Herman slipped underneath the line and stepped behind the crowd before he could be detained. “As I slipped away I saw an Asian man with a camera being chased after by a guard and grabbed from behind. His camera was taken away, and he was physically forced into an unmarked sport utility vehicle several store fronts down from the entrance to the park.” His whereabouts and identity are unknown.

Construction for the Chinese Ethnic Culture Park began in 1992 when Beijing bid for the 2000 Olympics. A key priority for the Chinese government in its Olympics propaganda has been to portray a picture of harmony between Han Chinese and Tibetans, as well as depict Tibetans as one of many Chinese minority groups who are “happy” under Chinese rule. The Culture Park is a tool in the Chinese government’s attempt to convince Chinese citizens as well as the rest of the world of the legitimacy of its rule in Tibet. “The park is an abomination,” said Mr. Herman, “While the Chinese are charging Olympic spectators the equivalent of \$10 USD to ‘experience’ Tibetan culture from inside the Olympic Park they are simultaneously obliterating its very existence inside the so-called Tibetan Autonomous region. For the six million Tibetans inside the occupied TAR and other provinces of China daily life is characterized by an atmosphere of extreme fear.”

“The Chinese government is actively waging an Olympics propaganda campaign to showcase Tibet as legitimately theirs and Tibetans as happy under Chinese rule, but the reality is much different,” said Lhadon Tethong, Executive Director of Students for a Free Tibet. “While Tibetan song and dance is on display in Beijing, in Tibet, our culture is under siege and our people are being forcibly kept from speaking out about their repression at the hands of the Chinese authorities.”

As part of this crackdown, there has been a dramatic increase of troops in sensitive areas in eastern Tibet. Two Tibetan women were shot last Saturday, August 9th, in Ngaba, eastern Tibet (Chinese: Aba, Sichuan). One was injured in the hand and one in the leg; they are currently in the Ngaba County Civil Hospital. Since August 3rd, troops have increased from 2,000 in the town and surrounding area to 10,000 in the town alone. On March 16th, Chinese paramilitary troops fired into a crowd of peaceful protesting Tibetans in Ngaba, killing up to 13 according to eyewitnesses.

According to Mr. Herman, “As a student and teacher of Asian history, who has witnessed first hand the impact of the continued Chinese occupation of Tibet, I felt it was my duty as a person of conscience to speak out for the six million Tibetans who continue to be silenced.” said Mr. Herman, “At this critical time the only way I felt I could accomplish this was by going to Beijing, risking arrest, and reporting back on the realities on the ground. People outside of China need to know what is really happening while the glitzy and ultra-hyped Olympics unfold. It is simply not enough to have conviction. It’s how you put this conviction into action that truly counts. In March, with their lives hanging in the balance, ordinary Tibetans, monks and nuns began speaking out against the ongoing repression and brutal occupation orchestrated by the current Chinese administration. The least I could do as a free person was join in their chorus.”

The International Tibet Independence Movement (ITIM) was co-founded in 1995 by Taktser Rinpoche (Oldest brother of His Holiness The XIVth Dalai Lama), and Professor Larry Gerstein to

obtain Tibet's independence through non-violent methods. While ITIM is headquartered in Indiana, there are over 10,000 supporters of this organization worldwide.

Students for a Free Tibet (SFT) is a network of young people and activists campaigning for Tibet's independence, with 700 chapters in more than thirty countries worldwide. SFT's international headquarters are in New York, with offices in Toronto, London, and Dharamsala, India.

About Douglas F. Herman: Board Member, International Tibet Independence Movement (ITIM).

A native New Yorker, and recent M.A.T. graduate of the Center for Creative Teaching: Bennington College, VT, Douglas Herman is a practicing freelance photographer, filmmaker and writer. After spending six months traveling through Tibet and Tibetan Exile communities in Nepal, India and North America in 2002-03, he has continued to utilize his skills as a media artist and educator to increase global awareness of the absence of fundamental Human Rights and freedoms inside Tibet. He joined ITIM's Board in 2006.