

China used excessive force during Tibet protests: HRW

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Chinese security forces fired indiscriminately on Tibetan protesters in 2008 and beat and kicked others until they lay motionless on the ground, a rights group said in a report detailing unrest that the government says it suppressed legally.

The Human Rights Watch (HRW) report released yesterday — using rare eyewitness accounts — examines China's crackdown on the broadest anti-government uprising the country has faced from Tibetans in nearly 50 years.

Since the unrest, Beijing has sought to quash accounts of rights abuses. It has flooded Tibet with troops, put Tibetans under tighter scrutiny, reduced the flow of international tourists and allowed in only a few foreign reporters under government escort.

Among the report's findings: Witnesses say on March 14, 2008, security forces in Lhasa opened fire on protesters near the Barkhor, the heart of the old city. They say that at several rallies, security forces also hit demonstrators with batons and rifle butts until they were no longer moving. As protests spread across the Tibetan plateau, security forces shot at secondary school students headed to a demonstration and at monks and civilians marching toward government buildings.

The 73-page report says security forces tortured protesters and others during arrests and in detention by beating them and depriving them of food and sanitary conditions. It says hundreds of arrested Tibetans remain unaccounted for.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang (秦刚) accused Human Rights Watch of bias. The events in Lhasa were "serious, violent criminal incidents that caused great loss to the lives and property of the local people," Qin said in a statement.

He said authorities enforced the law in a legal, civilized way and that ethnic customs and human dignity were respected.

The 2008 uprising started with several days of anti-government protests by Buddhist monks in Lhasa and then turned into riots, with Tibetans attacking Chinese-owned shops and homes. China has said 22 people died in Lhasa. Overseas Tibet supporters say many more people were killed in protests and the ensuing security crackdown.

To compile its account, New York-based Human Rights Watch said its researchers interviewed 203 Tibetan refugees and visitors outside China between March 2008 and this past April.

"Over the past two years, security forces acted in a way that is completely disproportionate to the actual threat to public order," said Nicholas Bequelin, Asia researcher for Human Rights Watch.

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“The Chinese government could do something about it. This is not about their sovereignty in Tibet, this is about how their security forces behave,” he said.

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