

Trouble

Anti-Chinese riots erupted in Tibet's capital, Lhasa, this week, leaving scores of dead and injured. Tibetans were marking the 30th anniversary of the 1959 national uprising against Chinese rule. In it, 87,000 Tibetans died and 100,000 fled into exile with the nation's spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. China rushed in troops and imposed martial law.

But these riots, like recent ones in Tibet, are forcing the world to face the nasty political and moral dilemma posed by troubles on the roof of the world. Everyone wants to get on better with China. At the same time, however, China appears to be violating both the human and national rights of the Tibetans. Is it worth angering China for the sake of six million Tibetans in the world's most remote locale?

First, a bit of background. Tibet has been an independent kingdom throughout its history. From time to time, China has exercised varying degrees of influence or control over Tibet. In 1949-50, Tibet was an independent nation in both fact and law. That year, Mao's armies invaded and annexed Tibet, which then had about 6.4 million people, of whom only 100,000 were ethnic Chinese (Han or Hui). The world ignored the invasion.

China began almost at once to move ethnic Chinese settlers into Tibet. Over seven million Chinese civilians have been sent to Tibet, plus 400,000 troops. Today, Chinese outnumber Tibetans in the greater Tibet region.

Tibetans have put up ferocious resistance to China's colonization efforts. China has invariably responded with violent repression. A leading expert on Tibet, Dr. Michael Van Walt, estimates that in the period 1956-1976, some 1.2 million Tibetans died as a direct result of the Chinese occupation.

at the top of the world



Eric MARGOLIS

China also tried to erase from the Earth every vestige of Tibetan culture. More than 6,000 monasteries were destroyed, along with libraries, temples and religious works of art in one of modern history's most barbarous acts of vandalism.

Tibetans charge China with a policy of cultural genocide and say Chinese settlement is aimed at reducing them to a small minority on the Tibetan plateau. China admits to past "errors" but blames them on the Cultural Revolution. There is no policy of ethnic Chinese settlement in Tibet, insists Beijing. But Chinese statistics seem to tell another story.

Manchuria is the home of the once nomadic Manchurian people. Today, there are only two or three million Manchus left there amid 75 million Chinese who have moved in. In China's westernmost province of Sinkiang — which used to be called Turkestan — the ethnic Chinese population has increased from 200,000 in 1949 to about 6.5 million, outnumbering the local Moslems. The same process has happened to the Mongols in Inner Mongolia.

China's problem is, quite simply, that it's too crowded and must find land for expansion. The non-Chinese regions of China, such as Tibet, Sinkiang, Yunnan

and Guanxi, are mountainous or desert. They contain 60% of China's land but only 7% of its peoples. Almost equally important, Tibet is of immense strategic importance to China. The main access routes to Sinkiang run across the Tibetan plateau. This vast, dry plateau overlooks India, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma. The western end of Tibet rests on Kashmir. A bit further north, the Karakoram Highway is China's only land link with Pakistan and the Mideast. And just south of Tibet is mighty India, which has been feuding with China over their long Himalayan border.

India is warily watching events in Tibet, but so far has not intervened. Delhi has given exile to the Dalai Lama and must be tempted at times to make life difficult for China in Tibet. Curiously, the current situation there bears striking similarities to the West Bank and Gaza. In fact, you could call Tibet China's West Bank.

China routinely blasts Israel for oppressing the Palestinians and trying to colonize the West Bank and Gaza while it appears to be doing much the same thing in Tibet. The only difference is that there are lots more Chinese than Israelis.

So what to do? China's would-be friends, Canada included, have made tepid little protests over Tibet. None of them appears ready for a major rupture with Beijing for the sake of a bunch of exotics located around the corner from Shangri-La. Canada, that champion of human rights in South Africa, doesn't want to know about rights violations in Tibet.

Don't expect Ottawa to stop our profitable trade with China as it did with South Africa. To paraphrase Neville Chamberlain, it seems that Tibet will sadly remain one of those far-off places we know or care little about.