Tibetans: Mystical past, unclear futur

McLEODGANJ — On March 31, it was exactly 25 years since the Dalai Lama crossed the border into India after a dramatic escape from Tibet. Only a few weeks earlier, the Tibetan capital of Lhasa was shaken by an uprising against the Chinese, which had become increasingly powerful since the People's Liberation Army (PLA) first entered Tibet in 1950.

The course of events is fairly well-documented: the Chinese commander, Gen Tan Kuansan, had invited the Dalai Lama to attend a theatrical performance at the Military Area Command of the PLA in Lhasa. But many people feared that it was a plot to kidnap the young God King: Tibet's political as well as religious leader, and moreover somewhat of a symbol of the limited and fragile independence the country then still enjoyed.

Indian ties — which deteriorated even further after the border war of 1962. The pro-Western Tibetan exiles accused the Chinese of genocide, and their claims were supported by two reports filed by the International Commission of Jurists.

Now, however, as the Tibetans celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Lhasa uprising and their flight to India, world political constellations have changed dramatically. The position of the Tibetans is no longer what it used to be, and there is reason to review the developments since 1959.

Special to *The Nation*
by Bertil Lintner

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During the decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) almost 99% of the 4,000 monasteries which had been functioning prior to the Chinese intervention were either destroyed or had been converted into grain warehouses. Sacred mani-stones had been used to pave sewer drains, invaluable art treasures had disappeared and holy places desecrated.

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Thousands of people gathered outside the Dalai Lama's summer palace, the Norbulingka, and urged him not to attend the cultural show on March 10. The demonstration developed into open uprising; a rebel army of 20,000 men was mobilized within just a few days. The Government of Tibet declared independence from the People's Republic of China.

The Chinese sent in the PLA, and after a month of heavy fighting the rebellion was put down. The Dalai Lama — then only 24 years old — fled to India, where he was granted political asylum. With the God King came about 80,000 refugees, who were given permission to stay in camps in India, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan.

The fact that the Dalai Lama was allowed to set up a government in exile in India has been seen as one of the main obstacles for the normalization of Sino-

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But the Tibetans were different. They had a mystical past which many westerners found attractive, they were easy-going and remarkably cosmopolitan considering their previous isolation. Visitors took to them immediately. Aid workers, journalists, photographers and religious scholars — along with a great number of 'hippies' in search of Eastern spiritualism — flocked to the Tibetan camps in northern India and elsewhere in the Himalayas.

Politically more important was that the Tibetans happened to come from the right place at the right time. The cold war was still raging in 1959 and the US had established SEATO (the Southeast Asia Treaty Organiza-

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The 20,000 strong rebel army of 1959 had certainly been defeated and largely disarmed, but pockets of resistance still continued, especially among the Khampas, a tribe in Eastern Tibet. These were to make the backbone of the new insurgent army, which received training under the CIA's auspices in the forgotten, semi-independent kingdom of Mustang on the Sino-Nepalese border.

Guerrilla leaders were instructed at Camp Hale, Colorado, and were parachuted back into their homeland with supplies, arms and ammunition. Attacks against Chinese lorry convoys on the Lhasa highway became common — but the Tibetan war of resistance really never got off the ground. The US began to lose interest in the Tibetans when the Vietnam War and other issues attracted more attention, and stopped channelling funds to them altogether when Washington revised its China policy in 1971.

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The Chinese leaders blamed, rather conveniently, the mistakes on "the Gang of Four", the universal excuse for almost every shortcoming in the People's Republic nowadays. Despite that, however, it appears that the Chinese really have relaxed their grip over the daily life of the Tibetans. They are now allowed to visit their relatives in the refugee camps in India and Nepal, and many monasteries are reported to have started functioning again. Under Chinese rule, the number of Buddhist monks fell from 120,000 to 900 between 1959 and 1980. Now it is 1,400 and their ranks are swelling.

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How does the Dalai Lama view his years in exile? Is he going to return to Tibet? What are his political opinions? Those were some of the questions the Dalai Lama discussed during a long, exclusive interview in connection with the 25th anniversary of his flight from Tibet:

Your Holiness, the new Chinese leaders have invited you to visit Tibet, and you have also expressed your interest in a trip to Lhasa, possibly already next year. Have you reached any definite decision?

I sent my first fact-finding mission to Tibet in 1979, the second and the third in 1980, and a delegation of Tibetan officials visited Peking in 1982 to negotiate with the Chinese leadership. The Chinese would very much like to see me return, but I am still hesitating. Therefore, I hope to send yet another delegation later on this year and based on its report, I will make my decision — whether I'm going to visit Tibet during 1985. But I am still very hopeful.

But you are also hesitant — what is it that holds you back?

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Do you think that socialism and Tibetan Buddhism could exist side by side?

Yes, and very happily so! It could be a very good relationship. I have many times said that there is no contradiction between Buddhism and original Marxism — but the emphasis is on original! The way it has been practised has just resulted in demoralized societies, built up on force, violence and hatred. Something essential has been missing, and maybe that's the Buddhist element. Both Buddhists and true Marxists want brotherhood and equality, both want to uplift the poorer and weaker sections of the society. But equality should be reached by peaceful means, not through force.

'The Chinese are the bosses and all hard labour is being done by Tibetans.'

How would you sum up the experiences of the Tibetan people during the 25 years since you left your country?

It is, of course, a very unfortunate thing to be forced to leave one's homeland, to be forced to live as a refugee. We have lost our country, but at the same time we have gained many new friends and broken our previous isolation. Before, we did not know much about the outside world, and they knew even less about us. That has been changed now.

When we fled 25 years ago, our aims were to be self-reliant and to preserve our old culture, especially our religion. We have accomplished that and this is the positive side.

And inside Tibet?

Basically, Tibet has gone through three phases since 1959. The first lasted until the mid 60s and was a period of open rebellion against the Chinese. This was a ruthless time, and it was very difficult for our people. The 1966-76 period was the decade of the Cultural Revolution and this was disastrous for China proper, but even worse for us. Monasteries were razed, holy scriptures burnt and the Chinese tried to wipe out our culture, even our language.

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Moreover, if I go to Tibet, I don't want to go there as a guided tourist. I want to decide my own itinerary and so on. All these questions have to be discussed before I can make a definite decision.

Recently, a lot of visitors have come to see you from Tibet. What is their opinion? Have they asked you to return?

Yes, the old people want me to visit Tibet once more before they die. But the younger ones say that I should not return under present circumstances. Some even say that I would be a traitor if I went there as long as the Chinese are in charge.

If you returned for good, how would the new Tibet differ from the old society you left when you fled in 1959?

The old Tibet was a happy society, but it was also feudal and backward. We lived in extreme isolation from the outside world. Naturally, it needed a change. Now, the Chinese have taken care of that! But how? They call it socialism, but is it a socialism in which people have been turned into ragamuffins and beggars? When all their old habits have been turned bourgeoise — even drinking butter tea.

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From 1979/80 and onwards, the situation has improved slightly. People don't starve any more and there is a certain amount of freedom of worship. But the situation is still not satisfactory. The Chinese are the bosses and all hard labour is being done by Tibetans.

Apart from the question of your possible visit to Tibet next year, there is another issue that you have touched upon in several declarations. What is going to happen to the Dalai Lama institution? How is the next Dalai Lama going to be chosen?

The traditional method is to look for reincarnation, but this has caused many problems in the past. We have had bad experiences during the years that elapse after the old Dalai Lama has passed away, while the oracles are searching for the reborn one. And when the reincarnation eventually has been found, he will be under age for another two decades or so. Power-struggles and intrigues have been common in the past during these long interregnums.

I have myself expressed the possibility of appointing a successor during my lifetime. That is one way. There is also the Pope-model, that the senior lamas gather and choose a Dalai Lama among themselves. Another tradition, which some sects in Tibet follow, is that the head lama serves seven-year terms.

This is a question we discuss a lot right now. It is possible that I am the last Dalai Lama. The institution, as such, is not important; it is worth preserving only if it is beneficial to the Tibetan people.

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TIBETANS: MYSTICAL PAST, UNCLEAR FUTURE

why, at this point, the Chinese have so radically altered their Tibet policy may seem puzzling — but a simple look at the map explains the matter. To Peking, Tibet is of utmost strategic importance; it is one of China's major gateways to central and southern Asia. With 160,000 Soviet troops in Afghanistan and India allied with the USSR, a disquieted, or even dissatisfied, Tibet could prove disastrous to the Chinese.

An independent Tibet — which is what the Tibetan exiles demand — seems less likely than a Soviet withdrawal from Estonia, or Indonesia giving up East Timor, but it is reasonable to expect more freedom. The Chinese will probably keep a lower profile in education and civil administration, but at the same time maintain — or even strengthen — their military control.

But it is not only the Chinese who have paid increased attention to Tibet recently. When the US withdrew its support to the Tibetan resistance and diplomatic relations were established between Washington and Peking, the Tibetans suddenly found themselves abandoned by their former friends in the West. Given the anti-Chinese stand of the Tibetan exiles, it is hardly surprising that they became an easy prey for the Soviets.

The Dalai Lama was invited to visit Mongolia, scholarships were awarded to young Tibetans for further studies in Moscow, and cultural relations were initiated between the Soviet Union and the Dalai Lama's government in exile in Dharamsala.

In December 1983, G.E. Cherchesov, minister of culture of the "North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" and vice president of the USSR-India Friendship Society, visited Dharamsala and had a private audience with the Dalai Lama. During a public meeting afterwards, he was asked by young Tibetans whether there was any possibility of an armed Soviet intervention in Tibet to drive out the Chinese — and gave an evasive answer. Few observers, however, deem that kind of measure probably since it inevitably would result in a Third World War. But the Soviets are likely to increase their contacts with some of the Tibetans in exile, at least for the purpose of embarrassing the Chinese.

With the Tibetans now celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Lhasa uprising, confusion is widespread. The Dalai Lama himself wishes to visit Tibet. The Tibetan Young Congress has opened its door towards Moscow — but the vast majority of the refugees are quite well-established in India. Economically, they have done remarkably well during their years in exile. They are certainly better off than most Indians living in the villages surrounding Dharamsala — not to mention their countrymen inside Tibet. Some people living among the Tibetans even doubt whether they would like to give up what they have in India and return, even if they had the opportunity to do so.