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June 22, 2007

Interpol on trail of Buddhist killers

Jane Macartney in Beijing

RECOMMEND?

Interpol has issued wanted notices for two followers of a Tibetan sect accused of the ritualistic killing a decade ago of one of the Dalai Lama's closest associates.

The attack, in which two students were also killed, was apparently in revenge for the Nobel peace laureate's decision to ban the group after more than three centuries of mystic controversy.

The Interpol Red Notices for Lobsang Chodak, 36, and Tenzin Chozin, 40, issued at the request of the Indian police, are believed to be among the first demands by another country to arrest Chinese citizens living within their own country's borders. A Red Notice is not an arrest warrant but is a means by which Interpol notifies member nations that an individual is wanted in another country.

The notice leaves Beijing in a difficult position since China has been an active member of Interpol, frequently turning to the organisation for help to try to capture its citizens who have fled abroad.

Several Communist Party or government officials wanted for corruption have been returned to China in recent years. However, it is far from clear whether China will want to set a precedent by allowing its citizens to be sent abroad for trial. Yesterday China had no immediate response.

The murders provide a rare glimpse into the complex political and religious rivalries and debates within Tibetan Buddhism and around the Dalai Lama, who has been living in exile in northern India since an abortive uprising against Chinese rule in Tibet in 1959.

Indian police have accused Lobsang Chodak and Tenzin Chozin of stabbing Lobsang Gyatso, a close aide of the Dalai Lama and head of the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics, and two of his students on February 4, 1997, in the northern Indian town of Dharmasala.

They were killed in ritualistic murders in which as many as five men are believed to have taken turns to stab the prominent 70-year-old academic, who was an outspoken critic of the Dorje Shugden sect.

The suspects had arrived only days before from China, following a path well worn by Tibetan faithful eager for a glimpse of their exiled god-king at his home in Dharmasala. The murders, only 200 yards from the Dalai Lama's private residence, prompted an immediate tightening of security around him.

The Dalai Lama banned the Tibetan Buddhist deity Dorje Shugden in 1996 and forbade worship of this angel-demon spirit, saying that the deity was a threat to his personal safety as well as to the future of Tibet. That decision provoked political strife within the Tibetan community and has given birth to factions fiercely opposed to his action, including the British-based Shugden Supporters Community.

The deity has been a source of controversy within Tibet since the

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17th century and is a "protective" spirit, or one that is believed to be able to bring down its wrath upon enemies of its followers. Followers have been reported to have issued death threats against the Dalai Lama.

The divisive worship of Shugden has gained momentum in Tibet over the past few decades, leading to some speculation that Chinese authorities have favoured a sect that is highly critical of the authority and methods of the Dalai Lama. China brands the spiritual leader a separatist who seeks to use his religious authority and meetings with international leaders to gain independence for his homeland.

Dorje Shugden

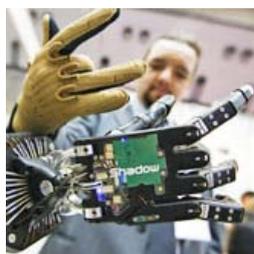
"A very powerful perfidious interfering spirit, born due to distorted prayers, [who] has been harming the teaching of the Buddha and sentient beings in general"

Source: the Dalai Lama

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