

Nepal likely to deport 10 Tibetan migrants  
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Kathmandu, Jan 17: Nepali authorities have arrested 10 Tibetan nationals who entered Nepal illegally and may face deportation to China, government officials said Sunday, a move that could signal a new crackdown on Tibetan migrants.

"We will interrogate the Tibetans to ascertain their motives and might hand them over to the Chinese Embassy for deportation," said Madhav Raj Regmi, head of the government's Department of Immigration.

If the Tibetans are handed over to the Chinese Embassy, it would mark the first deportation of illegal Tibetan migrants from Nepal.

Regmi said his department has yet to make a decision on the fate of the Tibetans. "The other course is to hand them over to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees," he said.

Nepal has tightened the screw on Tibetan exiles since mid-2008, but the government has continued to tacitly allow Tibetans entering Nepal to reach India, where their exiled leader the Dalai Lama is based.

The U.N. agency helps Tibetan refugees with their passage to India.

The 10 Tibetans -- eight men and two women -- were arrested in the Dolakha district, 150 kilometers east of Kathmandu, on Friday and handed over to the Department of Immigration on Sunday, according to the district's Deputy Police Superintendent Dhiraj Pratap Singh.

The Dolakha district shares a rugged Himalayan border with Tibet.

Tens of thousands of Tibetans have left Tibet since 1959 when the Dalai Lama fled to India in the wake of a failed Tibetan revolt against Chinese rule.

Nepal stopped issuing refugee papers to Tibetan migrants in 1989. By then, almost 23,000 Tibetans had received refugee status, according to UNHCR data.

The UNHCR says 200 to 300 Tibetans arrive in Nepal every month.

While the numbers dipped after mid-2008 when China stepped up security along the border following riots in Lhasa and anti-China protests by Tibetans in Nepal, they have gone up once again, according to an official at the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center in Kathmandu, which provides accommodation for Tibetans in transit.

Since 1989, the Nepali government has allowed illegal migrants to remain in Nepal for up to 15 days for transit to India with the assistance of the UNHCR.

Nepal is home to the second-largest Tibetan exile community after India. In addition to the 23,000 officially recognized refugees, thousands more are believed to be living in the country illegally.

Tibetan nationals in Nepal staged almost daily protests from mid-2008 to mid-2009 against what they describe as the Chinese occupation of Tibet.

The protests died out following an announcement by the Nepali government that it would deport Tibetans participating in protests against a friendly neighbor.

Nepal officially considers Tibet part of China, which is a major aid donor to the impoverished Himalayan nation. Nepalese police have arrested a group of Tibetans for crossing the border into the Himalayan nation illegally.

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