

After failed self-immolation, Tibetan says 'I won't repeat it'

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April 19, 2013

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DHARAMSALA, India (RNS) After more than 100 Tibetans have set themselves on fire, a man who tried and failed says he won't do it again -- but only because he doesn't want to create trouble for the Dalai Lama.

"I won't try to burn myself again," said the 30-year-old survivor Dawa Dhondup, a shy and soft-spoken man in Dharamsala, the Himalayan seat of the Dalai Lama's government-in-exile in northern India.

Dhondup drank kerosene and poured it all over his body before hundreds of Tibetans at a March 10 procession here to mark the anniversary of a failed 1959 uprising against Chinese rule. As he was about to light a match, fellow Tibetans and police overpowered him.

He has spent the last month undergoing treatment for the kerosene poisoning, and recently started a job as a cook at a Tibetan school.

Dhondup said he wanted to show solidarity with the 115 Tibetans who have self-immolated inside Tibet to protest Chinese rule and call for restoration of freedom and the return of the Dalai Lama.

While he doesn't regret his actions, he regrets any headaches he caused for the Dalai Lama in his adopted home city. It was the first time a Tibetan had tried to self-immolate near the Dalai Lama's headquarters.

Local police charged Dhondup with attempted suicide, and warned local Tibetans they could face restrictions if they tried to demonstrate on his behalf or otherwise cause trouble. A local Tibetan Youth Congress leader, Tenzin Tsundue, gave a

written promise that no Tibetans in Dharamsala would attempt a similar act.

The attempted suicide raised concerns with the Indian government because China has accused the Dalai Lama of inciting monks and nuns inside Tibet to set themselves ablaze. New Delhi often uses the presence of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile as leverage with China, but generally avoids provoking the ire of Beijing.

Dhondup, who walked for five days from his home in southern Tibet to India at age 18, said he was deeply disturbed by the criticism that the recent spate of self-immolations have failed to bring change in China's Tibet policy.

"I wanted the world to know Tibetans in Tibet are not alone in their suffering," he said.

A Buddhist and believer in reincarnation, Dhondup said he didn't know what consequences his action would yield in his next life. "Since I'm not educated, I had no other way to contribute; that's all I thought of."

He added that he wasn't afraid of a painful death, nor was he devoid of hope.

"I believe Tibet will be free during my lifetime because of the Dalai Lama's leadership," he said. "But there's no freedom in Tibet right now, and I wanted to do something about it. I won't repeat it though."