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From The Times

June 23, 2007

Crumpled passport 'proves' Tibet independence claim

Jeremy Page in Delhi

Crumpled, faded and torn at the edges, the sheet of paper looks unremarkable at first sight – a typical government document from Asia in the early 1900s, perhaps.

Closer inspection suggests that it is something extraordinary: a Tibetan passport issued to the Dalai Lama's finance minister and used in at least eight countries, including Britain, in 1948.

The document goes on public display for the first time this weekend at a conference in Delhi organised by radical Tibetan independence activists.

They say that it is the strongest evidence yet to support the Dalai Lama's longstanding claim that Tibet was an independent nation before Chinese communist forces entered in 1950. China says that Tibet has been an integral part of its territory for centuries.

If the document is genuine, it supports the view that Tibet was at least considered a de facto sovereign state by Britain and several other countries.

Type-print on the passport says that it was issued to Tsepon Shakabpa, a Tibetan finance minister, who led a trade delegation to China, India, the Middle East, Europe and the United States.

"We shall therefore be grateful if all the governments concerned on his route would kindly give due recognition as such, grant necessary passport, visa, etc, without any hindrance and render assistance in all possible ways to him," it says. The passport is covered in visa stamps from the countries.

Friends of Tibet, an international group campaigning for Tibetan independence, said it bought the document for \$10,000 (£5,000) from an antique dealer in Nepal in 2003.

"This is one document that can prove Tibet's independence," Tenzin Tsundue, its general secretary, told The Times. "When I heard about it I got so excited. I also realised that if I knew about it, so could the Chinese, so there was a sense of fear. There is no way that it is a fake." Security at the conference would be tight to prevent anyone from destroying or stealing the document, he said.

His group presented the document in 2004 to the office of the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, the town in northern India where he has lived since fleeing Tibet in 1959. "The passport is certainly genuine – Mr Shakabpa was very active in diplomacy," Thupten Samphel, a spokesman for the Dalai Lama, said. "This indicates that the places where he visited recognised the passport issued by the Tibetan government."

Mr Shakabpa never returned to Tibet after his mission, but settled in India and later lobbied on behalf of the region at the United Nations, Mr Samphel said.

The Dalai Lama will not attend this weekend's conference because its organisers are still calling for independence. "Our policy is to work with the Chinese," Mr Samphel said. "It's pointless to argue about history. We cannot change it, but we can change the future."

China accuses the Dalai Lama of being insincere in renouncing independence and wants him to admit that Tibet was always part of China.

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A spokesman for the Chinese Embassy said it was not clear if the passport was genuine since experts had not examined it. "But our position on Tibet is very clear – Tibet is a part of China," he said. "We have lots of evidence to prove that."

HAVE YOUR SAY

Sir,
The perception that the world is governed by civilised nation states and the rule of law is naught but an ephemeral chimera. The reality for those who do not live in the land of the Lotus-eaters, is that the world is a Darwinist jungle, "survival of the fittest, red in tooth and claw". The only truth is PB political barbarism, an uncivilised law of "might is right," masked by opportunism and expedient rhetoric.

SC, London, United Kingdom

China has guns, not evidence.

Thomas, Atlanta, GA, USA

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saibal dasgupta
times of india correspondent in beijing
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