

250,000 TIBETANS FORCED TO MOVE

ZENGSHOL, Tibet: The Chinese Government has relocated 250,000 Tibetans, nearly one-tenth of the population, from scattered hamlets to new "socialist villages," ordering them to build housing largely at their own expense.

The Government calls the year-old project the "comfortable housing program." It claims the new housing on main roads, sometimes only a kilometre from previous homes, will give farmers access to schools, jobs and healthcare. But the broader aim seems to be remaking Tibet — a region with its own culture, language and religious traditions — to have firmer control over its population.

China is pouring hundreds of millions of dollars into road-building and development projects in Tibet, boosting the economy, maintaining a large military presence and keeping close tabs on locals via a vast security apparatus of cameras and informants.

Other than a state media account that showed "beaming smiles" on the faces of farmers and herders as they built and moved into new housing in the socialist villages, the Chinese media have given almost no coverage to the forced relocation. The first critical account of the remaking of the Tibetan landscape came from New York-based Human Rights Watch, which quoted Tibetans who fled, trekking across the Himalayas into Nepal.

Witnesses told Human Rights Watch that peasants must take out loans of several thousand dollars to pay for the houses, which cost an average of \$US 6000, even though annual rural incomes hover around \$US 320 in this deeply impoverished region.

Farmers who failed to repay their loans forfeited the right to occupy the homes.

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