

**Radio Free Asia**

Six Ethnic Mongolian Herders' Defense 'Rushed' at Trial

2013-11-15



Ethnic Mongolians demand entry to the trial of six herders in Inner Mongolia's Ongniud Banner, Nov. 14, 2013.

Photo courtesy of SMHRIC

The families of six ethnic Mongolian herders who were tried this week for "sabotage" and "destruction of property" following clashes with Chinese workers from a state-run forestry company that took over their grazing land said they were denied a proper legal defense in a "rushed" trial this week.

Tulguur, Tugusbayar, Jargalt, Nasandalai, Munkhbayar, and Ulaanbar—all from the Bayannuur Gachaa village community of Shinsume township—stood trial on Thursday in eastern Inner Mongolia's Ongniud Banner (in Chinese, Wengniu Teqi).

Scuffles broke out at the courtroom after more than 100 ethnic Mongolian herders showed up in support of the group, relatives said.

Sarangowaa, wife of Tulguur, was beaten unconscious with an electric baton at the entrance of the court as riot police attempted to bar family members and herders from entering the courtroom, Tulguur's sister Longmei told RFA's Cantonese Service.

"They beat my sister-in-law with an electric baton until she fell over," Longmei said. "We then started shouting that this was supposed to be an open trial, asking why they wouldn't let us in."

"They clearly thought this wasn't going to work, so they came in [to sort it out]."

She said the lawyers for the herders, four of whom were Mongolian and four Han Chinese, were repeatedly cut off when they tried to speak up in court, as court officials appeared in a hurry to conclude proceedings in a single day.

"They wouldn't allow people to speak in their defense," she said. "They just rushed through it."

According to a copy of the charge sheet seen by RFA, Tulguur was accused of "directing the other herders to block the road with vehicles, obstructing Shuanghe Forestry Co. in its operations, and the destruction of property leading to economic losses."

Rushed trial

Longmei said the trial began at 9:00 a.m. and ended after one day. She said prosecutors appeared to lack evidence to support the charges that the men sabotaged any operations or destroyed any property.

"They are all innocent, and they have been framed," she said.

The New York-based Southern Mongolian Human Rights Information Center (SMHRIC) said only about 30 herders were allowed into the courtroom, including Sarangowaa, once she had regained consciousness.

A lawyer for the herders, who gave only his surname Zhou, said the trial had been conducted with an unusual level of secrecy for what he described as a "civil dispute turned into a criminal case."

"The authorities have escalated a civil dispute into a hard criminal case, with the aim of making an example to the local people," Zhou said.

"They prevent them from petitioning or complaining, and they prevent them from kicking up a fuss, and then they put a few of them on trial," he said.

Imprisonment expected

SMHRIC quoted Tugusbayar's sister Sobdoo, who said she wasn't hopeful that the herders' defense had been

effective, either.

"I think our attorneys did a great job defending the herders," she said. "But my impression is that everything seems to be decided behind the scenes."

The six men appeared in court in handcuffs, looking thin and pale, their relatives told SMHRIC.

The families now expect jail sentences for the men, but are standing by to appeal, the group said.

"We are ready to appeal to the higher court if they are found guilty," it quoted Longmei as saying in an e-mailed statement on Friday.

At the request of the defendants, the court proceedings were carried out in Mongolian. Those who could not speak Mongolian spoke through a Mongolian interpreter hired by the court, SMHRIC said.

Clash

All six men were detained by police in early June after a clash with Chinese workers from state-run company Shuang He Forestry and formally arrested three weeks later.

On Sept. 13, the Ongniud Banner Public Security Bureau transferred the case to the Ongniud Banner People's Procuratorate to prosecute the six herders, it said.

Authorities in Inner Mongolia have detained 52 people in connection with online posts in recent weeks, amid growing ethnic tension in the region and violent standoffs between ethnic minority herders and Chinese mining companies.

Clashes between Han Chinese and ethnic Mongolian herders protesting the exploitation of their grasslands are increasingly common in the region, which borders the independent country of Mongolia.

Rights activists say grasslands on which the herding communities depend for a living are constantly being taken over, forcing them to stand up for their rights.

Ethnic Mongolians, who make up almost 20 percent of Inner Mongolia's population of 23 million, complain of environmental destruction and unfair development policies in the region.

Reported by Hai Nan for RFA's Cantonese Service. Translated and written in English by Luisetta Mudie.