

KATHMANDU POST

Govt shuts down Dalai Lama's office

POST REPORT
KATHMANDU, Jan 27

In an inexplicable move, the government shut down the office of the Dalai Lama's Representative in Nepal as well as the Tibetan Refugee Welfare office in the capital last Friday and has remained tight-lipped over the issue.

Government officials confirmed the shutdown order but declined to give any details.

When asked, Wangchuk Tsering, representative of the Dalai Lama in Nepal, told the *Post*, "If the government says the offices have to be shut down, then they have to be. We are law-abiding people."

Tsering was clearly reluctant to

speaking more on the subject. However, when asked whether it would affect the Tibetan community in Nepal, Tsering replied: "Of course, it would affect the welfare efforts." There are more than 20,000 Tibetan refugees in Nepal. Hundreds of Tibetans, some estimates put the number at more than thousands, flee Tibet every year, alleging "Chinese repression".

Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Dr Prakash Sharan Mahat denied that the move was taken on the Chinese government's pressure. He said the offices were ordered closed since they were functioning without being registered with the government. Knowledgeable sources refuted

the minister's assertion, saying the move was aimed at appeasing the Chinese government, though the immediate cause is not known.

The government's explanation sounds hollow since the Office of the Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been operating since 1959, when thousands of Tibetans, including the Dalai Lama, fled Tibet when the Chinese army occupied it after a revolt. However, the Chinese government has been steadfastly maintaining that Tibet has been part of China for over 700 years.

The fleeing Tibetans use Nepal as transit on their way to India where tens of thousands of them have been

staying as refugees.

Friday's inexplicable move is similar to the government's deportation of 18 Tibetan refugees, including four children, to China on May 31, 2003, violating a long-standing policy of handing refugees over to the office of the UNHCR. There were strong protests by the global refugee body, the United States and European Union, among others.

The US Congress was so much incensed that Nepal's Foreign Secretary, Madhu Raman Acharya, during his visit in July that year, had to give a written assurance that the government would allow Tibetans to pass through Nepal and would not deport them to China.