

FOREIGN DESK

Study Links Malnutrition to Stunted Growth of Tibet's Children

By ERIK ECKHOLM (NYT) 348 words

BEIJING, Jan. 31 -- Half of all children in the Tibetan region of China suffer from stunted growth, medical problems and potentially impaired intellectual development as a result of malnutrition, according to a new study by American and Tibetan doctors.

The often small stature of Tibetans and others living in isolated mountain areas of Asia has sometimes been attributed to the effects of high altitude, and scientists have debated whether it signals broader health problems. But the new study, of 2,078 Tibetan children up to 7 years of age, drawn from a cross section of cities, villages and nomadic communities, found that stunting was linked to malnutrition rather than altitude and was often accompanied by bone disorders, depigmented hair, skin disorders and other diseases of malnutrition.

"Our data show that Tibetan children are not 'small but healthy,'" concluded the study, by researchers from the Public Health Institute in Santa Cruz, Calif., the University of California at Berkeley and the Tibet Medical Research Institute in Lhasa. "They have clinical signs of malnutrition as well as high morbidity and mortality."

The study is published in the Feb. 1 issue of The New England Journal of Medicine.

Tibet remains one of the world's poorest places, and the medical findings call into question the Chinese government's proclamations of great economic and social progress.

The official Tibet Daily, for example, declared on Jan. 18: "We have become a society of adequate food and clothing and have started marching towards one of relative comfort. This is a fantastic historical advance."

In recent years, China has promoted investment in Tibet and started antipoverty programs, but progress has been spotty, and Tibetans have resented the influx of ethnic Chinese, who often reap the greatest benefits.

In the new study, 56 percent of children aged 2 to 7 had moderate or severely stunted growth, compared with international standards.