

Public

AI Index: ASA 17/006/2002

Distrib:
PG/SC

To: Health professionals
From: Medical office / Asia Program
Date: 7 February 2002

Further information on
MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION
RELEASE of Ngawang Choephel
China

[Also see medical actions from 14 February 2000, ASA 17/03/00 and 9 October 2000, ASA 17/41/00]

Key words release / prisoner of conscience

After sustained campaigning by AI members and others, Ngawang Choephel was finally released on 20 January 2002. He was released for health reasons and has been flown to the United States for medical tests and treatment. He is thought to be suffering from lung and liver illnesses contracted during his time in prison.



Ngawang Choephel was imprisoned for six and a half years. In 1996 he was sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment for "espionage and counter-revolutionary activities". At the time of his detention he was gathering material for the production of a film documentary about traditional Tibetan performing arts. His trial was held in secret and the authorities produce no

evidence linking him to these "crimes". Amnesty International considered him to be a prisoner of conscience, imprisoned solely for exercising his fundamental right to freedom of expression. His mother, Sonam Dekyi, was only allowed to visit him in prison for the first time in August 2000.

Ngawang Choephel was released on the basis of a hitherto unknown regulation, apparently issued by China's Ministry of Justice in 1990, which provides for the release on medical parole of prisoners who have contracted serious and chronic illnesses and who have served at least one-third of their sentence (*Measures on Implementing Medical Parole for Prisoners, Doc No 147, 1990*).

Statement by Ngawang Choephel

On 23 January Ngawang Choephel made his first statement since his release:

"First of all I would like to say thank you to all the people who helped me and worked so hard for my release. I am very happy to be out of prison. I am grateful to all the Tibetans who shared their folk music with me in Tibet during my two months travel and even after my imprisonment. I am also grateful to all those who have supported my mother in the struggle to free me during the last six and a half years. Her suffering has been very painful for me, and I am overjoyed at the thought of seeing her again. My three primary concerns at the moment are my health, my mother, and my fellow Tibetan prisoners. While in Washington DC I am seeing doctors at Georgetown Hospital and George Washington University Hospital, and so far I am encouraged by my test results. As soon as I can I will travel to India to be with my mother and the rest of my family. I plan to return to the United States at a later date. I am especially grateful to the American government for all its support, and I thank the Chinese government for its ultimate response to the many appeals for my release. I sincerely hope that my release is the first of many more to come in the near future".

Members of AIUSA met Ngawang Choephel at a reception on 25 January 2002. Ngawang Choephel thanked Amnesty International members again for their work to get him released. He urged members to continue their work to ensure the release of other Tibetan prisoners of conscience.

Statement by Annie Lennox

The sustained campaigning by members of AI and other organizations on Ngawang Choephel's case won the support of several international public figures, including the UK-based singer-songwriter Annie Lennox. She made the following statement when she heard the news of his release:

"I was thrilled and delighted to hear of Ngawang Choephel's release. This is a true victory for his mother, Sonyam Deki, who initiated her own solitary campaign to bring attention to her son's plight several years ago on the streets of Delhi.

This confirms my deeply held conviction that "grass roots" level forms of protest can be immensely effective, especially in the field of human rights abuses.

As individuals living under the system of democracy and free speech we personally hold the tools to assist those who would be otherwise disempowered, tortured or imprisoned.

We owe it to ourselves as human beings with a conscience, not to abandon or neglect this power. If you are not a member of amnesty international or another such organisation then you haven't yet realised or understood what a difference you can make", Annie Lennox, 25/01/02

Recommended actions & addresses

Many thanks to all those who wrote letters calling for Ngawang Choephel's release. If your network has the capacity, please write further letters in English or your own language to the authorities below, using professionally-headed paper if you use this in your profession:

- welcoming the release of Ngawang Choephel under the 1990 *Measures on Implementing Medical Parole for Prisoners*;
- asking whether the authorities have plans to release other prisoners under this legislation;
- urging the authorities to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally.

Addresses

Zhang Fusen

Minister of Justice of the People's Republic of China
Buzhang
Sifabu
10 Chaoyangmen Nandajie, Chaoyangqu
Beijingshi 100020
People's Republic of China
Salutation: Your Excellency

Zhu Rongji
Premier of the People's Republic of China
Zhongguo Renmin Gongheguo Zongli
Guowuyuan
9 Xihuangchenggenbeijie
Beijingshi 100032
People's Republic of China
Salutation: Your Excellency

Legchog Zhuren
Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Regional People's Government
Zhuren Xizang Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu
1 Kang'angdonglu
Lasashi 850000, Xizang Zizhiqu
People's Republic of China
Salutation: Dear Chairman

Please send copies of your letters to diplomatic representatives of China accredited to your country.

If you receive no reply from the government or other recipients within two months of dispatch of your letter, please send a follow up letter seeking a response, referring to your previous letter(s). Please do not be discouraged by the possible lack of replies to your letters. They are noticed. Please check with the medical team if you are sending appeals after 7 April 2002, and send copies of any replies you do receive to the International Secretariat (att: medical team).

Monitoring of action

If you have access to e-mail you can help our attempt to monitor letter-writing actions. If you write one, two, three or more letters, please send us an e-mail and let us know. Please write in the subject line of your e-mail the index number of the action and the number of letters you write
e.g. ASA 17/006/2002 - 2 (if you write two letters).

Please send your message to medical@amnesty.org Thank you.