

Urgent Action In Focus

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Irene Khan at memorial site c. AI

MEXICO

Families seek justice for loved ones

"When we found her, my daughter's body told of everything that had been done to her."

Norma Andrade, Mother of Lilia Alejandra, 2002

On 21 February 2001, 17-year-old *maquila* worker **Lilia Alejandra Garcia** was found dead near Ciudad Juarez. She had been strangled, before being wrapped in a blanket and dumped. Over the last 10 years, more than 370 women have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua. At least 137 of them were sexually assaulted. According to the authorities, more than 70 young women are still missing, though local women's organizations believe the figure could be much higher.

Sixteen-year-old **Marcela Viviana Rayas** was found dead in a lonely spot near the city of Chihuahua. Her relatives had reported her missing on 16 March 2003. She was the eighth young woman to go missing in the city of Chihuahua since December 2002. On 17 February 2003, the half-naked bodies of **Esmeralda**

URGENT ACTION IN FOCUS

In **Urgent Action in Focus** we look in greater depth at some of the stories behind the Urgent Actions we have issued.

In this edition, we hear the testimonies of a Buddhist nun from **Tibet**, a **Syrian** prisoner of conscience, and a Canadian who had been facing a death sentence in **Saudi Arabia**. We also look at the plight of the families of murdered and missing women and girls in **Ciudad Juarez** and the Urgent Action networks campaigning on behalf of the "disappeared" of **Nepal**.

Future copies of UA Network will have one article which can also be circulated to the general public.

Juárez, aged 16, **Violeta Mabel Alvidrez**, aged 18 and **Juana Sandoval Reyna**, aged 17, were all found near each other among mounds of rubbish in the city of Chihuahua (UA 36/03, AMR 41/005/2003, 7 February 2003 and follow-ups).

Like the majority of victims, they were young, poor, women or adolescents. Students, factory workers in *maquiladora* (assembly plants which are set up by multinational companies) and workers in the formal or informal economy have also been killed. Their lives had just started. In the words of their mothers, sisters, teachers, or friends, they "wanted to make something of themselves" ("*querian salir adelante*"). However, their marginal role in society has meant that their deaths have had little impact beyond their family circle.



Marcela Viviana Rayas c. private

In August 2003, Amnesty International launched the report *Intolerable killings: 10 years of abductions and murder of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua* (AMR 41/026/2003). It focused on the alarming violence against women and young girls, as well as the failure of the Mexican authorities to protect some of its most vulnerable members of society. It was presented to the Mexican authorities, relatives of the victims, and national and international media by the Secretary General of Amnesty International, Irene Khan, during a visit to Mexico between 9 and 14 August 2003.

The report was launched simultaneously in Ciudad Juarez and Mexico City. It contained three main messages to the authorities, including to President Vicente Fox. These were, the need for decisive intervention by the federal authorities to ensure justice in the State of Chihuahua; the need for an independent judicial review of cases in which suspects have alleged violations in due process and fair trial, such as the use of torture; and public recognition for the dignity and legitimacy of the struggle for justice by the families of the victims and the human rights defenders working on their behalf.

Following the publication of the report and as a result of massive international pressure, the federal authorities announced a number of potentially important measures. These included the creation of a Joint Investigating and Prosecuting Agency, staffed by members of the Attorney General's office and the Chihuahua State Prosecutor's office with the mandate is to investigate the murders in Ciudad Juarez. In addition, a Commissioner to coordinate the federal government's involvement in clearing up the murders and abductions is to be appointed. Whilst Amnesty International welcomes these initiatives it will continue to monitor their effectiveness.

Despite the advances some of these measures may provide, there has been a lack of commitment to review the cases of those who have been killed and abducted.

Norma Ledesma, whose daughter **Paloma Escobar Ledesma** was found dead in May 2002 one of those who have spoken out, telling a press conference at the Mexico City launch of the report: "*All they have told us is lies, that is all... For the authorities, we represent nothing*"¹



Paloma Escobar Ledesma c. private

¹ The New York Times, August 12, 2003

Other families are far from satisfied with the response of the authorities, especially at state level. Their criticism has resulted in smear campaigns and acts of intimidations against them. In October 2003, **Evangalina Arce**, whose daughter **Silvia Arce** has been missing in Chihuahua since 1998, and **Marisela Ortiz** from the NGO *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Our Daughters Return Home) were subjected to threats and intimidation (UA 123/03, AMR 41/019/2003, 06 May 2003 and UA 322/03, AMR 41/049/2003, 10 November 2003).

Supported by the international community, including thousands of Amnesty International members, families and NGOs are therefore continuing their struggle for justice nationally and internationally. On 20 October 2003, relatives and NGOs including Amnesty International participated in a general hearing on "*The Situation of the Rights of Women in Ciudad Juárez, México: The Rights to be Free from Violence and Discrimination held in by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR)*". They insisted that the abduction and killing of women and young girls has not ended in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. A recent DNA test confirmed that a body discovered in September was that of **Diana Yasmín García Medrano**, aged 18 (WARN Action 6 June 2003). There is continuing concern for the safety of 14 year-old student **Judith Urías**, who was last seen on 9 March in the city of Chihuahua.

Moreover, the procedures followed by the authorities to tackle the cases are still not clear and allegations of suspects being tortured in order to force them to confess continues to undermine the credibility of justice system in the state. **Miguel David Mesa**, the cousin of a missing young woman called **Neyra Azucena Cervantes**, was arrested in Chihuahua in May 2003. He was reportedly unlawfully detained and tortured in order to make him confess to her murder. In August, Amnesty International received further information regarding two other cases in which detainees were allegedly tortured. **Cynthia Kicker** and her husband, **Ulises Perzabal** were accused of the kidnap and murder of **Marcela Viviana Rayas**. In this case, despite the insistence of the authorities, there are still doubts regarding the identity of the body found on 28 May 2003 in Chihuahua. A DNA test has not been used to confirm whether the body is that of Marcela Viviana Rayas.

"We don't deserve this treatment or the pain we are suffering everyday, all I am asking is that they find my daughter and for justice to be done." Eva Arce, mother of Silvia Arce.

The families of those who have been abducted and murdered often feel alone when faced with the unwillingness of the authorities to take their concerns about their missing loved ones seriously. Urgent Actions and the international solidarity that they provide have an important role in putting pressure on the authorities and in letting the victims families know that they are not alone. There is still a long way to go to end discrimination and violence against women and young girls in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. The fight for justice for the victims and their families continues. Every appeal letter demonstrates our commitment to ending the ongoing violence and the pain that this creates for those who have lost a loved one.

To show your solidarity for the women and young girls of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua go to: <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/mex-251103-action-eng>

SAUDI ARABIA

Foreign Nationals Speak Out About Torture in Custody

"I spent the next month, day in and day out living in fear, fear that I was going to be beaten to death and fear of the constant pain, until such time that being beheaded sounded like a good idea", former detainee William Sampson speaking to CBC News.

In February 2001, Canadian national William Sampson, British nationals Alexander Mitchell, James Patrick Lee, James Cottle and Les Walker, and Belgian national Raf Schyvens, were shown on Saudi Arabian television "confessing" to bombings which took place in Riyadh in November 2000. The men later retracted their confessions claiming that they had been tortured into making them. A sixth man, Peter Brandon, did not appear on television, but was also convicted following a secret trial which fell far short of international standards.

On 8 August 2003, William Sampson and Alexander Mitchell, who had faced the death sentence, were released from *al Ha'ir* prison in Saudi Arabia following the clemency of King Fahd bin 'Abdul 'Aziz Al Saud. Raf Schyvens, James Patrick Lee, James Cottle, Les Walker and Peter Brandon who had been sentenced to long prison terms of between eight to eighteen years were also granted clemency and released on 8 August 2003. In a press statement issued by the Saudi Arabian Embassy in London regarding their release, King Fahd ordered "that the sentence served by these prisoners is to be lessened, that the time they have already spent in prison is to be deemed sufficient punishment, and that they are able to be set free".

Following their release, some of the men spoke to the international press about their experience and the torture that they had been subjected to. According to the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, Alexander Mitchell reportedly said, "I was kept awake for nine days, chained to the door of my cell so I could not sleep or sit down. In the evening times I was hooded, taken upstairs in chains to one of those interrogation rooms where the beatings then progressed to torture. The beatings started with punching, kicking, spitting, and eventually progressed to hitting me with sticks. They had this axe handle and I was beaten on the soles of my feet."

In an interview with Canadian CBC News, William Sampson said that he was "hung upside down and beaten across the backside, the feet and the scrotum. The pain from that is incredible. I just felt like my entire body was about to explode...parts of your body feel like they've set light to them, they are so inflamed and sore. To make sure I would be kept under control they made me watch Sandi Mitchell being beaten. And that still bothers me. It still is something that I have difficulty remembering without having an emotional reaction to."

During their captivity, many organizations including Amnesty International campaigned on their behalf (UA 35/01, MDE 23/002/2001, 6 February 2001 and follow-ups).

A number of the men, including Sandi Mitchell and William Sampson, have since contacted Amnesty International and thanked everyone involved in working on their case for all their help and support.

SYRIA

Former Prisoner of Conscience visits Amnesty International

"I come from a country where basic human rights are violated, where political prisoners die under torture, where arbitrary detention takes place, where hundreds of political prisoners are detained without trial..."

Riad al-Turk, the 73-year-old former First Secretary of the Communist Party - Political Bureau (CP-PB) in Syria, has been a prisoner of conscience for much of his adult life and was held in solitary confinement for nearly 18 years. Over the years, his imprisonment, torture and ill-health has led Amnesty International to issue numerous Urgent Actions on his behalf. In September 2003 he visited Amnesty International's offices in London, United Kingdom and was interviewed by staff members.



Riad al-Turk with the UA issued on his behalf
c.AI

Riad al-Turk's experience of Syrian jails and torture methods spans half a century. He was just 22 when he was first arrested in 1952 for belonging to the Communist Party. He was held for several months and tortured.

"The torture," he says, "was mild compared to what was used later... Then, there were only two rooms in the palace used by the security forces... Now there are castles with dungeons that can accommodate unlimited numbers of prisoners."

In 1960 he was again arrested, tortured and imprisoned, this time for opposing the unity of Syria and Egypt at the height of the Arab nationalist movement led by Egyptian President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. *"The Egyptian security forces brought with them harsher torture methods", he says. "Falaqa (beating on the soles of the feet) was introduced... and people died in custody as a result."*

His longest period of imprisonment began in October 1980, when he was arrested for his membership of the CP-PB and his outspoken opposition to Syria's presence in Lebanon. Again he was tortured, and again the torture was more severe. For the next 18 years he was held almost constantly in solitary confinement and suffered serious health problems, including diabetes and heart and kidney ailments.

Commenting on how he survived, Riad said: *"You have to forget about the outside world... and find ways to kill time otherwise time will kill you."* Without books, pens or paper, he relied on the tiny stones he found in the lentil soup served daily. He collected them to make ever-more intricate and artistic shapes on the floor. He also devised physical exercises to do in his two-square-metre cell.

His wife, Asmah al-Feisal, a medical doctor who was imprisoned for 20 months between 1980 and 1982 said: *"We didn't see him for 13 years, or even know for sure where he was."* She did however collect all the documents which were written on his behalf when he was in prison.

Riad al-Turk was released in an presidential amnesty in 1998 at the age of 68. Two years later when the new President, Bashar al-Asad, appeared to lift the lid on the repression, Riad encouraged political debate, released political prisoners, and spoke of reforms. During

what became known as the "Damascus Spring", thousands of people, including Riad al-Turk, took part in lively political forums around the country. However, the political arrests resumed and Riad al-Turk was detained in September 2001. He was subsequently sentenced to two years' imprisonment, of which he served 15 months.

Despite his harrowing experiences, Riad al-Turk remains active and defiant - determined, as he says, *"to fight for freedom, justice and democracy"*.

"Humanity is in need of Amnesty International more than at any point in the past because human rights violations are not just limited to authoritarian regimes," he told AI. He also spoke with gratitude of the solidarity shown by Amnesty International members towards him and other prisoners in Syria's jails. **"Amnesty International's support was like a candle that lit the darkness of the cell and left the spark alive and vivid in our souls."**

Riad al-Turk never saw any of the Urgent Actions written on his behalf but has said: "I would like to thank Amnesty International for the work it has done on my behalf and Amnesty International for the work it has done over the years for the release of all prisoners, particularly those who are seriously ill in Syria".

This is adapted from an article which appeared in *The Wire* (November 2003 Vol.33 N10, AI Index: NWS 2/010/2003)

RUSSIAN FEDERATION

UA Network Acts To Bring "Justice For Everybody"

Over the past year, members of the Urgent Action network have been among the hundreds of thousands of activists taking part in AI's international campaign against the worst human rights violations in the Russian Federation.

Throughout the campaign, AI members have worked to focus international attention on patterns of injustice and to encourage the Russian authorities to abide by their international obligations. AI's action focused on three key areas: human rights violations against ethnic and national minorities; violence against women; and children's rights. The ongoing conflict in Chechnya also proved to be another focal point for campaigning and lobbying.



Young boy with 'Give Kids Passports' banner
c. School of Peace

In March 2003, AI launched "Dokumenty", a report on racism and discrimination (AI Index: EUR 46/001/2003). The report was followed by a roundtable discussion between AI and a number of NGOs, following which a joint appeal was sent to President Putin on behalf of former Soviet citizens who have been denied their right to citizenship through discriminatory legislation and practices. The joint appeal gave a clear indication that AI was campaigning on issues of key concern to civil society within the Russian Federation.

AI activists also tackled racism and discrimination when in May 2003 they called for an investigation into a racist attack which took place in two villages in Krasnodar Territory the month before. Around 30 ethnic minority community members sustained injuries during the attack. Such attacks are commonplace in the Russian Federation, and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice, leaving ethnic minorities feeling vulnerable and unprotected.

Following appeals by AI, an investigation was opened into the attacks and several meetings took place between regional and local officials. A Krasnodar regional official reportedly said: *"even children from London have sent faxes to the Governor"*. Appeals also stimulated media coverage on federal TV channels and in a leading Russian daily newspaper called "Izvestiya", which stated, *"the local authorities had been concealing the incident until yesterday when it was reported by AI"*. Campaigning on this case continues. (EUR 46/064/2003)

Those who work on behalf of ethnic minority communities also found themselves subject to harassment and intimidation. In early August 2003, the "School of Peace", a non-governmental minority rights organization, was put under considerable pressure by the authorities in the Krasnodar Territory to stop its campaigning on behalf of the Meskhetian minority. Thousands of Meskhetian are being denied their legal rights, including the right to citizenship, contrary to federal law. The closure of the "School of Peace" was requested by the Krasnodar Ministry of Justice on 22 July, on the basis that that it no longer employed three founding members, as required by law.

An Urgent Action (EXTRA 39/03, EUR 46/069/2003, 12 August 2003) was issued expressing concern at this alleged harassment. After a number of postponements, the final court hearing in this case took place in early December 2003 where it was decided that the organization should be closed down for breaching its statutes. However, "School of Peace" have launched an appeal against this decision and have also applied to the European Court

of Human Rights.

In a letter to AI, Vadim Karastelev, director of the "School of Peace", expressed his gratitude for the support from AI and from other human rights organizations. He adds, that according to some of his contacts, the Krasnodar Ministry of Justice, which brought the law suit against the "School of Peace", feels the weight of international pressure and has privately admitted to having made procedural mistakes when attempting to close the school (EXTRA 39/03, EUR 46/069/2003, 12 August 2003). AI continues to campaign on this case.

In what appears to be a worrying trend, similar pressure has been put on several other NGOs in the region and throughout the Russian Federation to cease their activities in defence of human rights. During 2003 the local branch of the Meskhetian organization "Vatan" was forced to close down, as was the Krasnodar Human Rights Centre. The organization "Yuzhnaya Volna" (Southern Wave) has also been threatened with closure.

Urgent Action letter-writers joined AI's campaigning for children's rights in the Russian Federation when they responded to a UA (UA 285/02, EUR 46/035/2002) issued on behalf of Andrei Osenchugov and Aleksei Shishkin, who were charged with a robbery which was committed when they were under 18. AI expressed concern that they may have been tortured in detention and were in danger of further ill-treatment.

In August 2002 Andrei Osenchugov and Aleksei Shishkin were found guilty of robbery and were both sentenced to eight years' imprisonment. However, in a significant development, the Nizhnii Novgorod regional procuracy opened a criminal investigation into their allegations of torture and ill-treatment. International pressure was said to be one of the main contributing factors to the opening of the investigation.

In September 2003, a further Urgent Action (UA 274/03, EUR 46/061/2003) was issued following a report from Viktor Osenchugov, the father of Andrei Osenchugov, that his son and Aleksei Shishkin had been visited in the Arzamass juvenile correction facility by a law enforcement official who requested that they sign official requests to have the criminal case into their alleged torture and ill-treatment closed. When the boys refused, they were allegedly told that they would be transferred back to the Nizhnii Novgorod pre-trial detention centre where they would be forced to have the case closed. Since the time the UA was issued, no further threats or harassment against either of the detainees has been brought to AI's attention.

Many thanks to all those UA letter-writers who helped make a real difference in the Russian Federation. More information and opportunities to take action can be found at www.amnesty.org/russia.

NEPAL

Urgent Action Combats "Disappearance"

On 27 August 2003 the cease-fire between the government of Nepal and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist) broke down. With the resumption of the conflict came an alarming rise in human rights violations, particularly large numbers of arbitrary arrests, detentions, and "disappearances". Members of the security forces in plain clothes, suspected of belonging to the army, have been taking people into custody for "questioning", promising to return them "shortly." However, the vast majority have then "disappeared". When the relatives try to find them, the army deny they have them in their custody. Families have, however, occasionally been told about the location of their relative through unofficial sources, at least giving them some hope that they are still alive.

Despite the large number of arrests, however, we are beginning to see people being released, and there is some evidence that AI's Urgent Action (UA) network is playing a significant role in this. Since the end of the cease-fire AI has issued UAs on behalf of 110 individuals in Nepal, covering 105 suspected "disappearances" and five cases of torture. To date, 24 of these people have been released.

Many of those released report having been threatened by members of the security forces not to tell anyone about what happened to them while in detention. Afraid for their lives, many of them have understandably refused to talk. However, a few have, telling tales of torture, including beatings with bamboo sticks, kickings and suffocation using water. One man complained of not being able to walk for several days after receiving a particularly severe beating.

However, the UA network has saved some from this fate. One individual told AI that after a UA was issued on his "disappearance" the torture stopped. Not only that, the attitude of the security forces personnel towards him changed. He was soon released. One foreign diplomat sent a personal e-mail to AI thanking the UA network for their intervention on behalf of one individual who had been tortured during a previous detention, saying that we had helped stop an innocent man being tortured for a second time.

We continue to issue UAs at a challenging rate, but the pressure is building and others are beginning to take notice. On 12 November 2003, a number of senior UN officials including the United Nations Commission on Human Rights's Special Rapporteur on torture, Theo van Boven, issued a statement expressing their profound concern over reports that dozens of individuals are being detained secretly in Nepal and at risk of suffering torture and other forms of ill-treatment. Referring to UAs, the statement mentioned that, "In the last two months, 31 urgent appeals have been sent, most of them jointly, by the experts to the Government of Nepal regarding the alleged detention in unknown locations of 56 people".

Following on from this the Nepal National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) called for representatives of the UN Thematic Human Rights Mechanisms, including the Special Rapporteur on Torture and the Working Group on Enforced and Arbitrary Detention (WGEID). AI has backed up this call with its own press release, and a joint press release with the Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT), Human Rights Watch (HRW), International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), International Federation of Human Rights (FIDH), International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) and the World Organization against Torture (OMCT).

Thanks to the members of the Urgent Action network, a real difference is being made. Everyone who has written a letter or fax to the Nepalese authorities deserves congratulations for all their hard work. However, the fight against torture and "disappearance" in Nepal continues. Please keep writing appeals, and please keep saving lives.

For further background information, you might be interested in this article:
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,3604,1065692,00.html>

TIBET

My Life in Drapchi Prison

Thirteen-year-old Ngawang Sangdrol was amongst a group of young Buddhist nuns from the Garu nunnery, who joined a peaceful demonstration calling for independence for Tibet in August 1990. The Chinese police rounded up the demonstrators and beat them with sticks and iron bars. Recounting the experience, Ngawang says: 'They didn't care whether you were a child or an adult... They used to string us over the neck with our hands tied behind the back and then started kicking and beating, not only me but everybody.' They also used electroshock batons against the demonstrators.

Ngawang Sangdrol was released after nine months, but rearrested in 1992 again for participating in a peaceful demonstration and sentenced to three years in Drapchi prison. Conditions were not too bad at first, she says, but grew worse after 1994. Discipline was harsh. 'In the cells for example, we had to do our beds almost like soldiers, and then they came in to see if there was even a small fault. Then they would drag all the batch again on the floor and when you went to pick it up, they would start kicking you.'



**Ngawang Sangdrol
with her UA c.AI**

There were also military drills, marching in step or standing motionless in the sun for hours. 'An exercise we had to do was to stand in the square and look at the sun. They put two newspapers under our armpits, one between the legs, and on the head sometimes books and sometimes a small bucket with water.' The guards would come from behind and kick the prisoners or try to make them move. 'As soon as you moved, they would start beating you, so you had really to try to be still and hold on to your papers.' Some prisoners fainted, but anyone who tried to help them would be beaten.

All the prisoners had to work. She was assigned to the greenhouse. 'In the summer the heat in the greenhouse got nearly unbearable, but you couldn't complain, and we couldn't complain about not wanting to kill the insects.' The other prison work was spinning wool and knitting sweaters. Prisoners who failed to complete their assignments were denied visits from their families: they had to work at night to finish their daily quotas.

In 1993, 14 of the nuns in Drapchi secretly recorded Tibetan songs on a cassette recorder and smuggled the tape out of the prison. When the authorities found out, they extended the nuns' sentences. Ngawang Sangdrol's sentence was extended by six years. Another nun, Phuntsog Nyidrol, had her sentence extended by eight years.

In 1996, Ngawang's sentence was extended again. She had refused to stand up to show respect to a Chinese official. 'We were not allowed to show respect for our own Lama, so why should we do that to the Chinese officials?' she explains. As punishment, she was made to stand outside in the snow, where she started shouting for the independence of Tibet. She was held in solitary confinement for six months in a cramped, rat-infested cell,

was nearly starved to death, and another eight years were added to her sentence.

Drapchi prison held criminal or 'common' prisoners as well as political prisoners. Most of the common prisoners tried to avoid the political prisoners, although some expressed sympathy when the guards were not looking. Yet in May 1998 it was the common prisoners who set off the biggest pro-independence demonstrations in Drapchi when the Chinese flag was raised on 1 May.

Ngawang Sangdrol watched from a window. 'Suddenly the prisoners started to shout for independence for Tibet. Those who shouted were not only political prisoners but also criminal prisoners. Everybody was shouting the same slogans, things like "Independence for Tibet!" "You shouldn't put the Chinese flag on our soil", "Long live his Holiness! [the Dalai Lama]".' The police started beating the prisoners with sticks, then soldiers came and fired on the prisoners. 'Afterwards I couldn't see because we were pulled down from the windows, but all I could hear clearly were gunshots and shouts from people. In the other unit there were nuns and I could see the Chinese dragging them by their hair. The monks, the political prisoners, were beaten with iron batons on the head.'

The events were repeated three days later. 'On that day there weren't as many political prisoners as three days before. But again prisoners started to shout and we joined in from our windows.' The response again was to beat the prisoners. 'In my unit there were no soldiers but guards, who came in and started beating us. They were using iron batons and electric sticks. Then suddenly the guards singled me out and started just beating me, and there was another nun who helped me and protected my head. She was dragged away from me and they started beating her.' Ngawang Sangdrol has suffered from frequent severe headaches ever since this beating.

The Urgent Action network was mobilized on 24 July 1998 when UA 210/98, (ASA 17/25/98) was issued on behalf of the demonstrators. There were concerns at their ill-treatment, especially under interrogation, and at the curtailment of their peaceful right to freedom of expression. These were confirmed when after the demonstrations Ngawang Sangdrol learnt that six nuns had died. 'The Chinese said the reason for their death was suicide. I can't say for sure how they died but on the day of the demonstration what I clearly can say is that I heard a lot of gunshots.'

These were not the only deaths in the prison. 'In my unit there were three nuns who died. After they went under beatings, one was really in a very bad state, but she had to work and she had to do these military drills like everybody else. They released her because of her health conditions but soon after that she died. Usually you're not allowed to seek medical treatment. They only let you see the doctor when they know you're about to die. All of the three were released but they died soon after.'

After the demonstrations of May 1998, conditions worsened. 'We weren't allowed to go out of our cell any more, so we had to sleep, work, eat and use the toilet within the same cell. As a toilet we were given a small bucket that 12 people had to share... The bucket would be already full by midday, so you had to hold on until it was emptied in the evening. As for water, we were given only a very small amount which we had to use for drinking, washing your face and everything else.' The prisoners were deprived of soap and sanitary towels, which they had formerly been able to buy from the prison authorities. When some prisoners tried to steal extra water, they were caught and beaten.

Lack of soap and water meant the cell smelled so badly the guards would no longer go inside. It was only when a delegation arrived to visit the prison that the prisoners were

allowed to clean up. 'There's lots of preparation going on when a delegation comes, and for two days we have to wash ourselves, clean our cell.'

Ngawang Sangdrol believes visits from foreign delegations may have contributed to improvements, such as proper food and more water.

On 15 October 2002 the prison director told Ngawang Sangdrol the government was considering releasing her so she could seek medical treatment. He asked her to give details of her symptoms in writing, so she wrote that she had suffered pains after being beaten in prison. She was asked to re-write her letter, omitting reference to the beatings. 'This I did, but he then asked me to write that Tibet belongs to China. I answered him that I would never write such a thing.'

She was released on 17 October, shortly before the visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin to the United States. She had to report to prison officers once a month, and remained under surveillance at her sister's home, where she had gone to live, and the authorities made surprise visits to the house at all hours. She asked to go back to her monastery, but was refused permission.

Eventually, thanks to intense international pressure due to serious concerns for her health, Ngawang Sangdrol was allowed to leave Tibet at the end of March 2003 to seek medical treatment abroad. She has visited support groups and organisations in Europe and the USA and has the following message:

'Thanks to you all I'm now out of prison but there's a lot of prisoners – not only in Tibet but all over the world – and I hope that you can help somehow to release all these prisoners.'

This is adapted from an article by Rosa Leuci, AI Tibet Coordinator which appears in AMNESTY the magazine of Amnesty International UK. (September/ October 2003, Issue 121)