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Bhutan: Amnesty International welcomes release of prisoner of conscience

Amnesty International has written to Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck to welcome the unconditional release of 40 political prisoners, including Tek Nath Rizal, following an amnesty granted by the King.

Tek Nath Rizal has been in prison for more than 10 years. Amnesty International declared him a prisoner of conscience when he was held for the peaceful expression of his political beliefs, in particular his campaign against government policies unfairly affecting members of the Nepali-speaking community in southern Bhutan.

In December last year, the government of Bhutan permitted an Amnesty International delegation to visit Tek Nath Rizal and other political prisoners held at Chemgang detention centre. The delegation later expressed concern over Tek Nath Rizal's health and called for his release on humanitarian grounds.

"We hope the release of Tek Nath Rizal will contribute to a just and lasting solution to the problems faced by tens of thousands of people currently in refugee camps in eastern Nepal, who claim they have the right to return to Bhutan," Amnesty International said.

Tek Nath Rizal was the main leader of this community at the time of his arrest in 1989. After he was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1993,

the King granted him a pardon made conditional on the success of bilateral negotiations between Bhutan and Nepal on the plight of the refugees.

Amnesty International has always argued that linking the release of Tek Nath Rizal to a process over which he has no control is unfair.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London,

UK, on 44 171 413 5566 or visit our website at <http://www.amnesty.org>

