China: Tibet's longest-serving female prisoner of conscience finally released

Amnesty International today welcomed the release from prison on 24 February 2004 of Phuntsog Nyidron, Tibet's longest-serving female political prisoner. However, the organization stressed that she should not have been imprisoned in the first place for her peaceful protests, and once again called upon the Chinese government to release all prisoners of conscience.

"Phuntsog Nyidron is one of several Tibetan prisoners of conscience in recent years to have been released before serving their full sentence," Amnesty International emphasized. "This is extremely encouraging for all those who have campaigned on her behalf."

Phuntsog Nyidron was due for release in March 2005. The formal reason for her early release remains unclear, but the Chinese authorities have reportedly said that it is a "humanitarian gesture". China frequently releases high-profile prisoners in the run-up to important political and diplomatic occasions. It is thought that the timing of her release may be connected to the upcoming session of the UN Commission on Human Rights as well as the EU-China human rights dialogue which is currently taking place in Dublin.

"Of course her release is welcomed, but the cynical timing of her release as China's human rights record comes under international scrutiny is indicative of China's attitude towards prisoners of conscience," Amnesty International said.

A nun from Phenpo County in Lhasa, Phuntsog Nyidron was severely beaten on several occasions during her imprisonment in Lhasa's notorious Drapchi Prison, and serious concerns remain for her health. Ngawang Sangdrol, another nun imprisoned around the same time as Phuntsog Nyidron, was released in September 2002 on "medical parole" having suffered similar beatings and torture in Drapchi. Since her release, Ngawang Sangdrol has lobbied hard on behalf of Phuntsog Nyidron, helping to keep her case in the public eye.

"The Chinese government must accept responsibility for the health and welfare of prison inmates in the People's Republic of China," said Amnesty International. "It is simply astounding that torture and other forms of ill-treatment are still going on, and that the people responsible are not even investigated, let alone punished."

Background
Phuntsog Nyidron was one of six nuns who staged a peaceful protest in central Lhasa in 1989 calling for Tibetan independence. She was initially sentenced to nine years at a secret trial, but in 1993 her sentence..."
was increased by eight years on a charge of "spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda" from her cell, when she and 13 other nuns secretly recorded songs calling for Tibetan independence. Phuntsog Nyidron is last of these "singing nuns" to be released.

Phuntsog Nyidron was reportedly severely beaten in May 1998 when she refused to sing pro-China songs during a flag-raising ceremony in Drapchi. Several fellow prisoners reportedly died following beatings as a result of the protests at the flag-raising ceremony. Phuntsog Nyidron's total sentence of 17 years was reduced by one year in 2002 for "showing signs of repentance".

An estimated 145 Tibetan political prisoners are currently held in Chinese prisons, with around 70 held in Drapchi.

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