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China: Release of Tibetan prisoner of conscience welcome but authorities must do more

Amnesty International welcomed yesterday's release of Tibetan music scholar, Ngawang Choephel, but urged the Chinese authorities to go one step further by freeing all those jailed in Tibet in violation of their fundamental human rights.

Amnesty International members around the world who have campaigned for Ngawang Choephel's release over the last six years welcomed the news. "But the fact remains that like other prisoners of conscience in Tibet, he should never have been jailed in the first place," the organization said.

Ngawang Choephel is reported to have been released on medical grounds after serving six-and-a-half years of his 18-year sentence and has been flown to the USA for medical treatment. Several Chinese dissidents have been released into exile by being flown to the USA immediately upon release, but Ngawang Choephel is the first Tibetan prisoner of conscience to have been released in this way.

He is thought to be suffering from lung and liver ailments contracted during his time in prison and is currently undergoing medical tests. Tibetan prisons are notorious for their poor food and poor sanitary conditions which contribute to long-term health problems for many prisoners.

"Poor conditions of detention coupled with widespread torture and abuse make life extremely harsh for all those jailed in Tibet," Amnesty International said.

Another political prisoner, Ngawang Lochoe, a 28-year-old Buddhist nun from Lhasa, reportedly died in custody in Drapchi Prison in February last year, apparently due to pancreatitis. Unofficial reports suggest that she was only hospitalized on the day that she died and there are serious concerns that beatings or other forms of torture and ill-treatment may have also contributed to her death.

"The Chinese authorities should release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally and take urgent steps to bring an end to torture and improve conditions throughout its detention and criminal justice system," Amnesty International said.

Background

Ngawang Choephel is a musicologist specialising in traditional Tibetan performing arts. He grew up in Tibet's exile community in India, but travelled to Tibet in July 1995 to make a video documentary about Tibetan music and dance. He failed to return to India as scheduled and unofficial reports later suggested that he had been arrested and detained. The Chinese authorities only confirmed his detention one year later, when an official radio report announced that he had been sentenced and imprisoned for 18 years after being found guilty of committing "espionage" and "counter-revolutionary activities".

His trial was held in secret and the authorities failed to produce any evidence linking him to these "crimes" giving rise to serious concerns that he had been imprisoned solely for exercising his fundamental human right to freedom of expression.

After repeated petitions over several years, the Chinese authorities finally allowed Ngawang Choephel's mother, Sonam Dekyi, to visit her son in prison for the first time in August 2000. She said that he was just "skin and bone", his face was yellow and that he did not seem strong mentally. Sonam Dekyi has been one of the strongest advocates for his release, campaigning tirelessly around the world to keep her son's case in the public eye.

Following his incarceration, Amnesty International members in various countries, including Ghana, Finland, Chile and the USA, campaigned for Ngawang Choephel's release along with several other non-governmental organizations. This attracted the attention of high profile public figures, including the British singer-songwriter, Annie Lennox, and a number of politicians, particularly in the USA where Ngawang Choephel had studied under a Fulbright scholarship.

Ngawang Choephel had served most of his sentence in the Tibetan prisons of Nyari, Drapchi and Powo Tramo, but was moved to Deyang Prison in Sichuan Province shortly before his mother's visit. He is expected to return to India after undergoing medical tests and receiving any necessary treatment in the USA.

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