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China: Amnesty International welcomes release of Tibet's longest serving prisoner of conscience

Amnesty International today welcomed the recent release of Jigme Sangpo, Tibet's longest serving prisoner of conscience, and urged the Chinese authorities to continue with prisoner releases.

"It is highly unusual for prisoners to be released before the end of their sentences," Amnesty International said. "His release is a credit to all those who have campaigned to keep his case in the public eye."

The 76-year-old former primary school teacher, who has been beaten and spent time in solitary confinement, was released on Sunday on medical parole, eight years before the end of a 28-year sentence in Tibet's notorious Drapchi Prison. His sentence had been extended twice after protests in prison.

Jigme Sangpo's release follows the release in January of another Tibetan prisoner of conscience, Ngawang Choephel, also on medical parole.

"Poor conditions of detention coupled with widespread torture and abuse make life extremely harsh for all those jailed in Tibet", Amnesty International said. "The Chinese authorities should release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally. It should take urgent steps to bring an end to torture and improve conditions throughout its detention and criminal justice system."

Background

Jigme Sangpo had spent most of the past 40 years behind bars. He was first arrested in the 1960s and sent to a re-education camp for allegedly "subjecting his students to corporal punishment". He was

arrested again in 1970 and sentenced to ten years in prison for his political activities.

His latest period of detention, in Drapchi Prison, began in 1983 when he was given a 15-year sentence for "spreading counter-revolutionary propaganda" after he posted up a wall-poster calling for Tibetan independence. The sentence was extended by five years in 1988 after he shouted "reactionary slogans", and a further eight years in 1991 after he shouted "Free Tibet" during a visit to the prison by the Swiss ambassador to China.

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