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PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

**Increased concern for Ngawang Choephel's
health after mother allowed prison visit**

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The mother of Tibetan musicologist, Ngawang Choephel, arrived in Kathmandu on 8 August having been permitted to travel to Tibet to visit her son for the first time since he was imprisoned five years ago. This was the first time Sonam Dekyi had been given permission by the Chinese authorities to travel from India to visit her son in Tibet, despite having campaigned to be allowed to visit him for several years.

Having been allowed to see Ngawang Choephel twice during a six day stay in Tibet, Sonam Dekyi and her brother Tsering Wangdu, report that Ngawang Choephel is in bad health; that he is weak, thin and appears to be jaundiced.

Ngawang Choephel, aged 34, is serving an 18 year sentence after having been detained in 1995 and accused of “espionage and counter-revolutionary activities”. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Approximately one month before the visit took place, Ngawang Choephel was transferred to a prison in Chengdu city, Sichuan province, from the Tibet Autonomous Regional No.2 Labour Reform Detachment (commonly known as Powo Tramo). The two, one-hour visits, took place at the prison in Chengdu under close surveillance by at least four or five officials. Throughout their stay in Tibet, Sonam Dekyi and Tsering Wangdu were accompanied by two Tibetan officials.

The prison visits are reported to have taken place strictly in accordance with regulations. Throughout the visit Ngawang Choephel was standing at a counter, separated from his relatives, standing at another counter, by two layers of wire-netting. They were not allowed any physical contact and officials told the family not to be emotional and on more than one occasion told them to stop crying. They were instructed to speak only in Tibetan so that their conversation could be understood by the officials present. They were instructed not to discuss anything not relevant to their visit and not to speak about the Chinese Constitution or law.

Sonam Dekyi reported that Ngawang Choephel had had his hair cut and beard shaved, but looked “physically weak and frail and did not seem strong mentally” and that “he was just skin and bones, his face was yellow”¹.

For eight days prior to the visit, Ngawang Choephel had been in hospital in Chengdu where he reportedly received diagnosis and treatment for a number of ailments. He told his mother that he had written a petition and been on hunger strike at Powo Tramo to protest at not receiving adequate medical care. His transfer to Chengdu may have been to provide access to better medical facilities. Ngawang Choephel was also able to tell his mother that the hospital in Chengdu confirmed he is suffering from liver, lung and stomach ailments, and possibly also a urinary tract infection².

In late 1999 a Chinese government source reported that Ngawang Choephel had “developed symptoms of bronchitis, pulmonary infection and hepatitis around October 1998” but that he had “made a quick recovery after two months of medical treatment”³. However, prison conditions throughout Tibet are known to be very poor. Prisoners receive inadequate food of a very poor standard. Prisons have poor sanitation and many prisoners suffer long-term health problems as a result.

¹ See Tibet Information Network update, “Exile Tibetan musicologist’s mother visits son in Chinese prison”, 9 August 2000.

² For information on Ngawang Choephel’s health, please see AI Medical Letter Writing Action, AI Index: ASA 17/03/00, 14 February 2000.

³ Letter from Ambassador Li Zhaoxing, to United States Senator James Jeffords, 20 October 1999.

Fears that Ngawang Choephel has been tortured or otherwise ill-treated in detention were difficult to confirm during the visit, however, Sonam Dekyi and Tsering Wangdu were told by a prison officer that Ngawang Choephel had been a “‘difficult prisoner’ who had failed to ‘confess his crimes’ fully”. Few prisoners in Tibet escape ill-treatment and torture, particularly during the early stages of custody and initial interrogation. Prisoners who are perceived as un-cooperative during interrogation may be treated even more harshly.

Ngawang Choephel indicated that his treatment in Powo Tramo has been acceptable and was an improvement on the treatment he had received in the past. This may suggest that he suffered ill-treatment while detained at the Nyari detention centre in Shigatse where he was initially imprisoned.

Ngawang Choephel reportedly told his mother not to worry about him and asked her to thank all his friends around the world who had taken an interest in his case and who had helped his mother.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In July 1995 Ngawang Choephel travelled to Tibet to make a film documentary about traditional Tibetan performing arts. He had not lived in Tibet since 1968 when his family fled to India. Prior to his detention, he had been studying music for one year on a Fulbright scholarship at Middlebury College, Vermont, in the United States. He was first reported missing by his mother who was expecting him to return to India in December 1995.

Information later emerged that Ngawang Choephel had been detained from Shigatse market at the end of August 1995. He was seen on 16 September 1995 when he was brought into Nyari Detention Centre, where he was held without charge or trial in incommunicado detention for over 14 months.

On 26 December 1996 an official Chinese radio report announced that Ngawang Choephel had been sentenced to 18 years’ imprisonment for “espionage” and “counter-revolutionary activities”, plus a further four years’ deprivation of political rights to be served after release. However, the report of the trial, held behind closed doors at Shigatse Intermediate People’s Court, gave no information to substantiate these accusations or to show that Ngawang Choephel was involved in activities threatening national security. No evidence has been made public that Ngawang Choephel was travelling in Tibet for any other reason than his stated purpose of filming and recording traditional Tibetan performing arts. His sentence was confirmed on 24 September 1997 when his on appeal to the Tibet Autonomous Region Higher People’s Court was rejected.

Amnesty International considers Ngawang Choephel to be a prisoner of conscience detained by the Chinese authorities for his imputed political activities. He was convicted after an unfair trial held in secret, and no evidence of his alleged offence has been produced by the authorities. The organization is expressing concern at the persistent reports regarding Ngawang Choephel’s ill-health and is seeking information on his current state of health and any treatment he is receiving. Amnesty International is urging the Chinese authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally.

This document is sent to China and CHIRAN Coordinators for action by groups. It is sent to Sections for information. Check with the East Asia Sub-Regional Team if sending appeals after 30 October 2000.

KEYWORDS: *PRISONER OF CONSCIENCE1 / ILL-HEALTH / PRISON
CONDITIONS / HUNGER-STRIKE / FEAR OF TORTURE/ILL-TREATMENT*

INTERNATIONAL SECRETARIAT, 1 EASTON STREET, LONDON WC1X 8DJ, UNITED KINGDOM

Please send telegrams/telexes/express and airmail letters in English, Chinese or in your own language:

- ◆ **urging the immediate and unconditional release of Ngawang Choephel;**
- ◆ **expressing concern at the recent reports that Ngawang Choephel is suffering from liver, lung and stomach ailments, and possibly also a urinary tract infection, which confirm previous official reports that he has had bronchitis, hepatitis and respiratory infections while in prison;**
- ◆ **urging the Chinese authorities to consider releasing Ngawang Choephel on medical parole in order that he can receive all necessary medical care;**
- ◆ **urging the authorities to provide Ngawang Choephel with adequate medical care, food and satisfactory prison conditions while he remains in detention;**
- ◆ **request that his family are given regular access to him.**

NOTE:

Article 214 of the Criminal Procedure Law states that a prisoner may be permitted to temporarily serve his/her sentence outside prison if s/he is “seriously ill and needs to be released on parole for medical treatment”. Medical parole is exercised at the discretion of the authorities.

Please send appeals to:

(please note that faxes in China are unreliable and often do not work outside office hours)

Premier of the People's Republic of China

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(c/o Ministry of Justice)

Salutation: Your Excellency

Chairman of the Tibet Autonomous Regional People's Government

Legchog Zhuren
Xizang Zizhiqu Renmin Zhengfu
1 Kang'angdonglu
Lasashi 850000, Xizang Zizhiqu
People's Republic of China

Salutation: Dear Chairman

Prison Bureau Director of the Xizang Autonomous Regional Bureau of Justice

Tsering Phuntsog Juzhang
Sifaju
Duodilu, Lasashi 850000
Xizang Zizhiqu
People's Republic of China

Telegram: Director of the Tibet Autonomous Regional Bureau of Justice, Lasa, Xizang Autonomous Region, China

Salutation: Dear Director