

TORTURE IN TIBET



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On October 4, 1988, the People's Republic of China ratified the **UN Convention Against Torture & Other Cruel, Degrading Treatment or Punishment**, and assured the international community that "China will implement in good faith its obligations undertaken in the Convention". Since then, over 70 Tibetan political prisoners were tortured to death and hundred more have been massacred for having participated in pro-independence demonstrations. In March 1989 alone, a Chinese official reporter representing *Chinese Journalists' Association* confirmed that over 450 Tibetans, including monks, nuns and civilians, were killed while taking part in the demonstration.

The **UN Committee Against Torture** has repeatedly asked China to change its laws to ban all forms of torture. In its report on May 1996, the Committee stated, "there has been a failure to incorporate a definition of torture in China's domestic legal system in terms consistent with the provisions of the Convention". Ever since China occupied Tibet in 1959, torture has been used as a key method of repression against the Tibetan people. Tibetan political prisoners in particular are at the greatest risk of being tortured. These prisoners, many of whom are monks and nuns, are often imprisoned for exercising their freedom of expression in support of the Dalai Lama.

China claims that it adheres to international law, which effectively bars the use of torture. In 1992, China reported to the **UN Committee Against Torture** that it had adopted effective legislative, judicial, administrative and other measures to "rigorously forbid all acts of torture and guarantee that the rights of citizens are not violated". However, interviews of former political prisoners testify that torture is most widespread in Tibet. In its report published in December 1997, the International Commission of jurists reported that torture has been, and continues to be, applied routinely and on a wide scale throughout China.

TORTURE IN DETENTION CENTRES

Countless cruel and degrading torture methods have been described by former political prisoners, including: being hung from the ceiling with their hands tied behind their backs; struck with electric cattle prods; shocked all around their bodies; beaten with wooden planks and clubs; being set on by dogs; being forced to stand naked in front of other prisoners, sometimes while being beaten; having fires lit beneath them and left with their eyes burning from the smoke; being forced to

stand on iced ground until the skin of their feet was stuck to it, long periods of solitary confinement and deprivation of food, water and sleep.

From time to time, prison officials change their torture techniques and have been adopting new methods, which leave no visible traces of torture. Many ex-prisoners reported to have heard from prison officers, words such as: "Do not hurt him from the outside; disable him with internal injuries".

In addition to physical torture, prisoners are sometimes forced to undergo psychological trauma. Prison officers often threaten to hurt the prisoners' families, pressure them to denounce the Dalai Lama and force them to accuse other Tibetans of partaking in political activities.

In 1989, **Lhundup Ganden**, a 30 year old monk from Gaden Monastery, was sentenced to six years in prison, but released in 1992, when he became temporarily paralyzed as a result of extreme torture. He gave us an idea of the brutality he experienced while in prison: "The worst torture was when they would make me strip and beat me with electric batons all over my body. Afterwards, I was unable to sleep on my back and buttocks. My skin swelled, turned green and blue, and there were cuts also. Electric batons and wire were used all the time: they tied the wire around my wrist and the shock was extremely painful."

One of Lhundup's worst memories from Gutsa was the day a truck full of Tibetan political prisoners arrived at the prison: "Everyone had been so badly tortured that they were unable to stand on their feet, so the Chinese officials just threw them from the truck on the ground. The Public Security Bureau kept throwing the prisoners one on top of the other... The corridor of the detention centre was full of blood. Three prisoners were found dead in the pile and were taken back in the same truck."

Hanging prisoners from the ceiling with a fire burning underneath is a method commonly described by former political prisoners. Often chilly is thrown on the fire, producing a thick smoke and enhancing the burns. **Jampel Tsering**, a monk from Gaden Monastery, who served five-year prison term in Drapchi Prison for leading a demonstration in Lhasa in 1989 recalls, "when they sprayed chilli powder on the fire it provoked a terrible burning sensation on my whole body, and each time I was unable to open my eyes for several hours".

MEDICAL CARE DENIED FOR TORTURE VICTIMS

The Chinese government claims that prisoners are accorded the medical treatment necessary in their daily lives. However, most deaths occur due to torture and maltreatment followed by lack of medical care while in detention and in prison. After release, former prisoners are responsible for their own medical expenses. There have been a number of reported cases where individuals have been required to repay authorities for the cost of living while imprisoned and medical expenses incurred as a result of torture.

Phuntsok, a 22 year old monk from Nalanda Monastery was arrested on 25 February 1995, after a crackdown at the monastery following resistance to a 're-education campaign'. In Gutsa Detention Centre during interrogation, PSB officials accused him of concealing documents and he was tortured. He was released in February of 1996 on medical parole but during detention he had been denied medical care. For a period of time, he was admitted to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) People's Hospital. His treatment expenses were a drain on his family's meagre resource, while his health never improved. Norbu died in March 1999, almost three years after his release.

TORTURED WOMEN

The nature of the brutal treatment and sexual indignities imposed upon women in prison is distinct from the punishment endured by the male prisoners. Such a difference raises the issue of gender-specific torture. Ruthless beatings, starvation, rape, attack by vicious dogs and sexual assaults are amongst many of the atrocities reported. Sexual violations have included: laceration of nipples, electric cattle prods being forced into the vagina until the women fell unconscious, and the wrapping of charged electric wires around the breasts and body.

While imprisoned, **Tenzin Choeden**, a nun, was sexually abused with an electric cattle prod at the age of 18. She was arrested, along with 12 nuns, for taking part in a demonstration in Lhasa on 14 February 1988. While Tenzin was detained at Gutsa Detention Centre, four women prison officials ordered her to **get up and stand against the wall**. Tenzin reports that she argued with the officials **and thereafter**, "they inserted a stick into my vagina four times with full force. **Then the stick was inserted into my mouth**. I tried to keep my mouth closed but she **inserted** it very

hard causing my lips to bleed and two of my teeth became loose.”

After she was released in 1991, Tenzin fled to India. As a result of repeated beatings and torture, she has lost one third of her physical ability and is particularly handicapped along the right side of her body. No exceptions are made for pregnant women in detainment.

Damchoe Pelmo was three and a half months pregnant when she was arrested in June 1993. The night of her arrest she was kept standing in a cold room while being interrogated. She told her interrogators that she was pregnant and feeling weak, but her complaints were ignored. She recalls, “by the next morning I had been standing for 14 hours in a row and was so stiff that I could scarcely move. I was suffering such incredible pain that I was unable to bend my legs or sit down. The following day, while I was trying to go to the toilet, I was suddenly struck with dizziness and I fell unconscious. Before losing consciousness, I knew that I had lost my baby.” Despite testifying in court about losing her baby, Damchoe Pelmo was sentenced to three years in Drapchi prison.

TORTURE RESULTING IN DEATH

As a result of having been beaten so badly, some prisoners have died. TCHRD has records of 70 deaths from 1987 to date that have resulted from prison torture. Normally, if a prisoner is on the verge of a death, which is linked to torture, he or she is hospitalised or released. Once in the hospital, prisoners’ family is called in to sign a ‘term of responsibility’, which means that they are responsible for all medical bills from the date of the term’s signature. The person often dies outside of prison walls, making Chinese Government appear less culpable.

Sonam Wangdu, alias ‘shugden’, died in late March 1999 at his residence in Lhasa. Wangdu was arrested in April 1988 for alleged involvement in the killing of a Chinese policemen during a violent crackdown of a Tibetan demonstration on 5 March 1988. While in Gutsa detention centre he was severely tortured and this resulted in a permanent kidney damage and broken backbone. He suffered urinary damage and became paraplegic. According to a former political prisoner, Bhagdro, Wangdu was beaten with electric cattle prods and his legs and feet were manacled for a period of six months. He was suspended from a tree for five days, and put in solitary confinement for one week. He had his head forced into a bucketful of water and had blood

forcibly extracted from him. He was 44-year-old when he died.

Lhakpa Tsering died on 15 December 1990, thirteen months after his arrest. He was refused medical treatment on at least three occasions before his death. In December 1990, Lhakpa had boldly refused to obey instructions to tell a visiting foreign delegation to Drapchi Prison, that Tibet had never been independent. He was subsequently subjected to extensive interrogation sessions and badly beaten. Inmates in the adjoining cell heard him cry out: “Mother, please, save me! They are going to kill me!” He was 20 years old when he died.

The latest mass outbreak of death resulting from torture by the Chinese authorities occurred in the same Drapchi Prison, in May 1998. Following the two demonstrations, 11 prisoners are reported to have died. Of these, two were shot, three died as a result of severe beatings, three died from suffocation, one was hung and the cause death of the other two is not known.

FORCED BLOOD & FLUID DONATIONS

Forced blood extraction is another form of physical and psychological torture utilised by prison officials.

This method is used to physically weaken prisoners. At such high altitudes in Tibet, such loss of blood would weaken a person who is in good health. However, with poor diets and weakened tortured bodies, these blood extractions often lead to many prisoners’ deaths. Given that prisoners never know why their blood was extracted and never heard of the results of the ‘tests’, it is possible that it is done not only as punishment, but also for experimental purposes.

Extractions are also done to obtain fluid for medicine. **Phuntsok Yangkyi**, a nun who was arrested on 3 February 1992, was transferred to police hospital in mid-1994, where she was injected twice in her back by a Chinese doctor. Phuntsok went into a coma after the extraction, and her nails, tongue and lips turned bluish black (a sign of poisoning). She died on 4 June, at the age of 20, six days after being taken to the hospital.

Phuntsok’s parents were allowed access to her dead body under police escort and under the condition that they never speak about the visit. Her body was reportedly black and blue all over and her right foot was completely black. Her eyes and mouth:

were smeared with blood.

UNDERAGE TORTURE

While China signed the **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child** in April 1992, detainment, arrest and torture of children under the age of 18 is a common practice in Tibet.

Juveniles are detained in adult prisons, denied legal representation, forbidden to have contact with their families and subjected to the same form of hard labour and torture as other adult prisoners.

Sherab Ngawang, who died at the age of 15, is believed to be the youngest political prisoner to have died from torture in Tibet. As punishment for having sung freedom songs with other nuns in the prison, she was apparently beaten with electric batons and a plastic tube filled with sand. One source said: “They beat her until she was so covered with bruises that we could hardly recognise her.” Other sources reported that she was subjected to three days of solitary confinement and as a result, developed severe back pain and kidney problems. She also experienced loss of memory and had difficulty in eating. She eventually died two months after her release.

HARD LABOUR & EXERCISE

Intensive labour is required of all prisoners in Chinese prisons in Tibet. Hard labour during the day is often coupled with forced exercise and poor diet, designed to weaken the prisoners. In Tibet, prisoners are often employed in agriculture and lumbering, where work is exceptionally demanding, and accidents are frequent. Prisoners are often given “target” quotas to fulfill, aimed at profiting from their production for the prison authorities. These quotas are compulsory, even if prisoners are sick.

Ngawang Lhundrup, about 23 years old, was sent to forced labour after enduring interrogations and torture during his detainment at Gutsa Detention Centre. “When we were permitted to stop in the evening, our hands would be full of blisters, and we would be weak with exhaustion”.

Ngawang Jinpa, also known as Lobsang Dawa died in his hometown in Phenpo County on 20 May 1999. After his arrest on 6 May, 1996 Ngawang Jinpa was detained at Gutsa Detention centre for eight months where he was severely beaten. According to Legshe Drugdrak, a Nalanda monk from Phenpo County who shared a prison cell with Jinpa, “when Jinpa first arrived in Drapchi he was very weak. The prison officials continued to torture him and forced him to work”. In March 1999, Jinpa’s health deteriorated so much that the officials took him to ‘Tibet Autonomous Region’ (TAR) Military Hospital near Sera Monastery where he was diagnosed with brain damage. His condition was so hopeless that the Chinese authorities released him on medical parole on 14 March 1999. He was 31 year old at the time of his death.

Failure to perform a particular exercise in the required manner is swiftly punished, generally with beatings. Prisoners deeply resent the activities, not only for the physical exertion, but also for the mental control that is simultaneously exerted over them.

EXCERPTS FROM PERSONAL TESTIMONIES

“During my years in prison I was tortured many times. This included beatings; electric cattle prods shocks; prolonged exposure to extreme cold; blood drawing; verbal abuse including death threats to myself, my family and friends; deprivation of sleep, food, water, toilet and bath facilities and medical care; solitary confinement for six months; forced labour and exercises for prolonged periods without rest and forced standing still for long periods of time”.

Ngawang Rinchen a 32 year-old monk from Drepung Monastery was detained for six years and 10 months for participating in peaceful demonstrations.

“The worst torture I endured was when I was handcuffed with my arms around a hot chimney and left there for a whole day without food or water. The scorching heat of the chimney resulted in blisters all over my body. There was water running from the blisters and my wounds were stinging painfully from heavy perspiration. At night when the prison guards finally came to release my cuffs, my boots were completely filled with water from the sweat of my body”

Lobsang Dhargay, a monk from Ragya Monastery was detained for a year without trial in Golok Prison for charges of distributing leaflets reading “Free Tibet” and “Chinese Quit Tibet.”