

Phuntsog Nyidrol allowed to leave China

The Dui Hua Foundation report that Phuntsog Nyidrol, one of the 'Singing nuns' of Drapchi prison, was allowed to leave the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the US after her application for a passport was finally granted. She reached San Francisco International Airport on 15 March 2006, and continued her journey to Washington DC soon after.

Phuntsog Nyidrol (also known as Tseten Wangmo and Phuntsog Nyidron; Chin. Pengcuo Nizhen, Cidan), who was born in Lhundrub county and was a chantmistress at Mechungri Nunnery, was arrested in Lhasa on 14 October 1989, together with six other nuns who had staged a protest while the city was under martial law. She was sentenced by Lhasa Intermediate People's Court to nine years imprisonment for "*counter-revolutionary propaganda and incitement*" on 25 November 1989, and served her sentence at Drapchi (TAR Prison).

Phuntsog Nyidrol belongs to the group of 14 'Singing Nuns' who, while in detention, secretly recorded songs in June 1993. The songs received international attention after a cassette was smuggled out of Drapchi prison. Phuntsog Nyidrol received an eight years sentence extension in connection with the incident. She suffered from ill health after being repeatedly beaten in detention. She received the Reebok Human Rights Award in 1995.

In March 2001, Phuntsog Nyidrol's sentence was reduced by one year to 16 years for good behaviour. On 24 February 2004, the rest of her sentence was commuted and she was released two days later to live with her family outside Lhasa. However, she remained under permanent observation by the security forces. Because her political rights were suspended for five years following her release, she was barred from re-entering a nunnery, speaking with the press, or meeting freely with foreigners. Nevertheless, following international pressure, she was able to meet with a delegation of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

Phuntsog Nyidrol was flown from Lhasa to Beijing on 14 March and boarded a United Airlines flight to the US the next day. The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) reported that she had "*an emotional reunion*" on her arrival in the US with her former cell-mate Ngawang Sangdrol, who now lives in the US. Asked about her health by Radio Free Asia (RFA), she explained that she is suffering from three ailments, but did not reveal any further details. Staff at the US Embassy in Beijing noted that she appeared very weak and withdrawn. She is known to suffer from chronic fatigue.

Phuntsog Nyidrol was denied a passport for more than two years by the authorities in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) because her political rights were under restriction. However, John Kamm, Dui Hua's Executive Director, notes that this is not supported by PRC laws: "*Chinese law is very clear on this point, Chinese citizens cannot be denied passports simply because their political rights have been deprived by a court. The police may deny a passport to a person the government considers may create a threat to national security or do serious harm to national interests, but exclusion on such grounds should be the rare exception rather than the norm. We hope that the proper application of Chinese law regarding passports in the case of Phuntsog Nyidrol represents the recognition that ex-prisoners whose political rights are suspended have the right to hold passports and travel abroad*".

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