

*A Personal Testimony and Appeal from Nyima Lhamo, Niece of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche*

My name is Nyima Lhamo. I come from a nomadic family in Kham Eastern Tibet and am a mother of a 6-year old daughter. It was in July last year that I made a treacherous journey across the Himalayas to escape from Tibet into exile, into the free world risking the safety of my 6-year old daughter and mother.

The reason why I risked my own life and that of my family is because I wanted to tell the world the story of my uncle, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, a Tibetan who died of torture, ill-health and under suspicious circumstances in a Chinese prison in Tibet. His only crime was his faith in His Holiness the Dalai Lama, his leadership in the community and his work as a social and environmental advocate.

Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is a highly respected Tibetan lama, who died in custody on 12 July 2015 during his thirteenth year of detainment. He was serving a life sentence that had been handed down without a fair trial. Concern for his treatment in prison and the urgency of his need to be released on medical parole had not only been raised by our family but by international organisations. In 2010, 40,000 Tibetans in Tibet signed a petition seeking his release.

While incarcerated, my uncle would secretly send recorded messages advising us to "stop harming all sentient beings including small insects like ants." He confessed saying "the thought of harming others has ever crossed my mind." He was a man of principles who put the welfare of Tibetans before himself.

I escaped from Tibet with the hope that international community who stands for human rights, freedom and justice will ensure that what China did to my uncle will not happen to another innocent Tibetan or to any individual in this world.

My uncle was arbitrarily arrested from his monastery in April 2002, under trumped-up charges of being involved in a bomb blast in Chengdu. This caused a lot of distress for my family.

At the time of my uncle's arrest, I was only 12 years old. I was hopeful he would be released soon, since he committed no crime at all. However, I was wrong. My uncle was imprisoned for 13 years and breathed his last in the prison.

The distress and torment that my family has been subjected to since my uncle's arrest is one of many instances of what family members of political prisoners continue to face in Tibet.

My uncle's efforts towards the preservation of Tibetan cultural identity, conservation of Tibet's environment by speaking against unregulated mining and damming projects, construction of old people's homes, scores of clinics, and setting up of schools for orphans have recognized him not just a spiritual leader but also an environmentalist and social activist who devoted his entire life to serve the interests and well-being of Tibetans. Hence, I can vouch for the fact that the only crime my uncle committed was his leadership in advocating for Tibetan cultural and

environmental protection rights, which are actually guaranteed in the Chinese constitution.

Chinese authorities have done no justice in many cases including my uncle Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's case. He was denied fair trial, denied medical parole and finally he died under mysterious circumstances and we have enough reasons to believe that he was poisoned to death.

I clearly remember the day, it was on 2th July 2015, ten days before Rinpoche's death, much to our surprise, we were contacted by the prison authorities and told that we could meet Rinpoche. Hence, my mother and aunt left immediately for Chengdu where Rinpoche was imprisoned. However, after reaching there, the prison authorities kept postponing the visit for 10 days. At around 10 pm on July 12, my mother and aunt were informed of Rinpoche's death.

I received a call from my mother conveying the same. I immediately left for Chengdu. After reaching there, we were denied the opportunity to see Rinpoche's body. Our repeated appeals to see the body went unheeded. Therefore, my mother, my aunt and I, with some local Tibetans staged a protest against the authorities and demanded the return of his body to enable us to conduct the final Buddhist rites.

For Tibetan Buddhists, if there is one thing more important than life, it is the Buddhist rites that should be carried out the moment immediately following one's death. However, my uncle was denied this opportunity.

While protesting, my mother repeatedly hit her head against the wall. The pain of having to cope with my uncle's mysterious death, my mother subjecting herself to self-inflicted torture and my fellow villagers crying, was too much for me overcome and I contemplated committing suicide by hanging myself.

Such extreme acts of my mother and I prompted the prison authorizes to allow us inside the prison. We submitted a five-point appeal letter to the Chinese authorities citing a provision in its law that allows families to plea against cremation of prisoners. Much to our dismay, our appeals were not considered, and were informed that they would cremate the body in the morning. After seeing the body, I can testify that my uncle was poisoned to death in prison.

I have six reasons to believe that my uncle has been poisoned.

Firstly- I noticed that my uncle's lips were black and even the monks who had cleaned his body have observed that his fingers and toenails were also black.

Secondly, the timing of uncle's death in prison cited by the prison authorities kept changing with one version stating my uncle died at 2 in the evening, and in other time he died at around 4 in the evening.

Thirdly, it raises a deep concern as to why the Chinese authorities had not allowed my mother and aunt to meet Rinpoche despite the fact that the authorities themselves have summoned my mother and aunt to see Rinpoche. They kept on postponing the visit for 10 days.

Fourthly, the Chinese authorities did not provide any medical document or death certificate that could corroborate their claim that Rinpoche had a natural death.

Fifthly, the government officials denied our appeal to keep Rinpoche's dead body for 15 days in accordance with the Chinese prison law.

And finally, in violation of its own law, neither my uncle's body nor his ashes were returned to my family members.

Therefore, as I said in all meetings and people I have met, I am saying here again that my uncle was poisoned to death in Chinese prison.

Post the death of my uncle---the situation in my village turned for worse.

The Chinese authorities continued to dishonor my uncle in various manners. They distributed pamphlets and aired false and distorted information on Television saying "Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is a fake religious leader, a criminal and he was a threat to so-called social stability."

My family and local Tibetans were banned from offering traditional butter lamp and organizing public prayer in memory of Rinpoche. Local Tibetans were also stopped from building a memorial stupa for Rinpoche.

I have also heard that authorities in Nyagchuka, a village in Lithang are attempting to manipulate the reincarnation of Rinpoche like the Chinese authorities did in the case of 11th Panchen Lama, Gedhun Choekyi Nyima.

Also pictures of Rinpoche are banned in my village. Rinpoche's personal belongings and all other valuables were confiscated.

I am speaking here knowing the fact that this will put my mother and 6-year old daughter's life in danger. But I am willing to risk their lives and my life, to attest to the fact that the repressive policies of Chinese government in Tibet are making lives of Tibetans unlivable.

Finally, I request and urge you and your office to engage with China

- That the Chinese authorities allegations against my uncle be thoroughly investigated and push China to reveal the circumstances that led to the death of my uncle in Chinese prison.
- Arrange for an independent fact-finding delegation to visit Tibet and assess the situation in Tibet, especially the Chinese prisons in Tibet

Thank you.