

Nyima Lhamo Testimony for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Good Morning Everyone!

My name is Nyima Lhamo, and I am the niece of the late Trulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, A Tibetan Buddhist master, who died mysteriously while in a Chinese prison. I would like to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for giving me this opportunity to draw attention to the case of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche as well as the plight of my fellow Tibetans in Tibet at the United States Congress.

I come from a nomadic family from Lithang, Kham in eastern Tibet. I am 26 years old and am one of five siblings. I have a six-year old daughter and her name is Dawa Dolma. My uncle Trulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche was a highly respected lama, both inside and outside of Tibet. He was known for his philanthropic work in Tibet, where he established schools, clinics, orphanages, old-age homes, and worked for the preservation of Tibetan culture and the conservation of Tibet's environment. I consider my uncle as my teacher who taught me the real meaning of being a Tibetan Buddhist, someone who always helped others in need and had no ill intentions toward others. When I heard the news of his arrest in 2002, I was only 12 years old. The first thing that came to my mind was that my uncle would be released soon since he had not committed any crime - however, I was wrong. Justice was not served in my uncle's case. He was falsely accused and unlawfully detained by the Chinese authorities, and sentenced to life in prison. Trulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche died on 12 July 2015 in Chengdu after 13 years of false imprisonment. We appealed for an independent and fair trial, we sought for medical parole and in 2010 - 40,000 Tibetans in Tibet signed a petition seeking his release. But these efforts have yielded no positive result; instead my family and local Tibetans have been subjected to harassment, discrimination, and many were arrested and sustained injuries from gunshots while demanding justice for my uncle following his death.

Growing up in Tibet, it was common to hear about such sad instances of Tibetan political prisoners dying in Chinese police custody and having justice for them denied. I know there are many other Tibetans who continue to face the same fate as my uncle. So with a lot of difficulties and hardship, I escaped Tibet but for a very important reason - to share the suffering of my late uncle, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, and that of other political prisoners in Tibet, who continue to suffer under the repressive Chinese rule. It is a wonderful feeling to be here and experience the freedom that I have always yearned for. I feel extremely happy to be in front of all of you and I am most grateful to you for giving me this opportunity to speak. Today, I would like to emphasize on two points and my hope regarding my uncle Trulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's case.

My two points are of the circumstances regarding the lead up to, and the eventual death, of my uncle.

First, I would like to speak about the situation before my uncle's death. On 2 July 2015, ten days before Rinpoche's death, we were informed that we could meet with him. Hence my mother, Dolkar Lhamo and my aunt left immediately for Chengdu, where he was being held. However, after reaching Chengdu, the prison authorities kept postponing the visit for 10 days. At around 10pm on 12 July, they were informed of Rinpoche's death. I received a call from my mother saying that Rinpoche had passed away.

Immediately thereafter, I left for Chengdu. As soon as I reached Chengdu, my mother, my aunt, and I, alongside others, protested against the authorities for not allowing us to see and claim Rinpoche's body. We shouted, "You killed Rinpoche! If you didn't kill him, give us the medical certificates." Out of distress, my mother hit her head against the wall and shouted to see Rinpoche's medical report to prove China's claims of a natural death. We protested in front of the officials asking them, "If we belong to "one nation," as you claim, then why are we being treated differently? Why do you have two policies for the so-called "one nation?" Then I attempted suicide by tying scarf around my neck. Alarmed by our protest, the prison authorities let us into the prison office. Subsequently, they asked us to tell them our concerns. We gave them our concerns in writing; first, if Rinpoche died of natural causes, as stated by the authorities, we want the medical certificates that back this claim. Second, we requested them to preserve Rinpoche's body for 15 days in accordance with Chinese law. Third, we want clear information on who ordered Rinpoche's cremation and the refusal of his body being returned to his family. Finally, we will not carry any further appeals or petitions against the authorities regarding Rinpoche's case if his body is handed over to our family for the final Buddhist rites.

None of our concerns were addressed. Moreover, the authorities informed us that they would cremate Rinpoche's body at 7:00am the next day, against our wishes. 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.

Later, they let us in briefly to see Rinpoche's body. After seeing his body, I have six reasons to believe that my uncle was murdered in prison. First, the prison authorities did not allow my mother to meet Rinpoche and kept postponing the visit for 10 days. Second, they did not provide any medical documents or death certificate to corroborate the claim that Rinpoche died of a natural cause. Third, the government officials denied our request that Rinpoche's body be preserved for 15 days in accordance with the Chinese law. Fourth, the time of death cited by the authorities kept changing with one version stating that it occurred at 2pm and other at 4pm. Fifth, in violation of Chinese law, neither Rinpoche's body nor his ashes were returned to my family. Finally, when they let us see Rinpoche's body briefly, I noticed that his lips were black, and the monks who cleaned Rinpoche's body said his fingers and toenails were black, which raises suspicion of poisoning.

Shortly after the cremation of my uncle, my mother and I were detained and told that we had committed a serious crime. We were accused of leaking state secrets and told we should expect a sentence of life imprisonment. However, much to our surprise, after a few days, we were told to sign a document, noting the conditions of our release. The conditions included, 1. No information on Tenzin Delek Rinpoche shall be shared in Tibet. 2. No accusations shall be made against the Chinese authorities that Rinpoche was murdered by China and 3. No discussion on Rinpoche's death will take place at any public gatherings or to the outside world. We refused to sign these conditions. However, after two days, we were informed that the village leader had signed the conditions of our release on our behalf and that we should strictly follow his directions.

My second point is regarding the circumstances following Rinpoche's death, and the situation in Lithang now. After Rinpoche's death, the Chinese authorities continued to dishonor him in the following manners.

First, the Chinese authorities distributed pamphlets and aired false and distorted information on television, such as, Tulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is a fake lama, a criminal, and that he was a threat to the so-called "social stability". Second, my family and local Tibetans were not even allowed to offer traditional butter lamp and organise public prayer in memory of Rinpoche. Third, the local authorities did not allow the building of a memorial stupa for Rinpoche. Fourth, I have also heard that authorities in Nyagchuka (Chinese: Yajiang) are attempting to manipulate the reincarnation of Tenzin Delek Rinpoche, like the Chinese authorities did in the case of 11th Panchen Lama. Fifth, pictures of Rinpoche were banned in Lihang. Finally, Rinpoche's belongings, including his money, were confiscated and we were told they would be burnt.

These are the two points I wanted to share with you today. I feel very lucky and happy to be speaking in front of all of you today. An opportunity like this, to speak freely, is a long cherished aspiration of every Tibetan inside Tibet. When I was in Tibet, whenever I heard news of the United States' support for Tibet and His Holiness the Dalai Lama, it brought me hope. With this hope, I fled Tibet leaving my family, including my six-year old daughter behind. I know my speaking here may jeopardize my family's safety in Tibet. Despite that, I am taking all the risks and speaking in front of you today with sincere hope, and appeal to the international community to prevail against the Chinese government to carry out a thorough investigation into the circumstances leading to the death of my uncle, Tenzin Delek Rinpoche.

Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's case is an example of Chinese Government's mistreatment of the Tibetan people. But the Tibetans in Tibet have not given up their hope for freedom and return of His Holiness Dalai Lama to Tibet. In this critical time, I believe it is important for United States of America to stand with Tibet. I sincerely hope that the voices of the Tibetan people are heard and justice is served.

I would also like to talk about the sad news about Liu Xiaobo. Liu Xiaobo's case shows that China has learned nothing from my uncle's unnecessary and tragic death. I appeal to you to step forward and ensure that Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's death is the last caused by China's cruel and inhumane torture. As fellow human beings, we are all morally obliged to ensure that China's treatment of Liu Xiaobo doesn't go unnoticed.

Last but not least, on behalf of Rinpoche, my family and his supporters, I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, leaders of United States of America, international civil societies, and all the supporters for taking every possible action to highlight Tenzin Delek Rinpoche's case at the highest level to hold China accountable for the crime. I sincerely hope that you will continue to use every possible political and diplomatic instrument to raise the issue of Tibet.

I want to conclude by saying, though it is unfortunate and sad that Trulku Tenzin Delek Rinpoche is no longer with us today, I strongly believe he will always live in our thoughts, our hope for freedom, our everyday struggle, and our love for Tibet.

Thank you again for this opportunity.