



INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR TIBET

UN experts demand information about detained Tibetan environmental defenders

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UN human rights experts have called on the Chinese government to provide information about nine Tibetans imprisoned for their peaceful efforts to protect Tibet's environment, which is crucial to the entire region.

In a [statement](#) today, the three experts—the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; *the Special Rapporteur on freedom of assembly and association*; and *the Special Rapporteur on human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment*—admonished the Chinese government to provide details about the reason for detention and the health conditions of the nine Tibetans, all of whom were detained between 2010 and 2019.

The Special Rapporteurs also emphasized that Chinese authorities should provide adequate medical care and permit the Tibetans' families to visit them. They also stated that the lack of information shared by Chinese authorities could be interpreted as a “deliberate attempt” to hide the environmental defenders from global attention.

“We welcome the Special Rapporteurs’ forceful challenge to Chinese authorities’ persecution of environmental defenders,” said Kai Mueller, Executive Director of the International Campaign for Tibet Germany. *“China must reverse its dismal record and prove its claimed prioritization of environmental protection is more than a global smoke screen for unfettered exploitation of the Tibetan Plateau. It must prove that by releasing these nine activists and ending its broad persecution of Tibetan environmental defenders.”*

Mueller added: *“The international community should raise these cases of persecution during the upcoming Universal Periodic Review of China at the United Nations Human Rights Council early next year.”*

Prison sentences of up to 11 years

The nine Tibetans identified in the release—Anya Sengdra, Dorjee Daktal, Kelsang Choklang, Dhongye, Rinchen Namdol, Tsultrim Gonpo, Jangchup Ngodup, Sogru Abhu and Namesy—were all detained after they protested illegal mining activities or exposed the poaching of endangered species.

While some were handed prison sentences of up to 11 years, the length of sentences imposed in six cases—namely against Dhongye, Rinchen Namdol, Tsultrim Gonpo, Jangchup Ngodup, Sogru Abhu and Namsey—have not been made public by the Chinese government.

As the UN experts underscored, the extent to which the imprisoned Tibetans had access to legal representation, and whether any of them have been provided with medical assistance while in prison, also remain unclear.

Increasingly persecuted

Over the last two decades, as the Chinese government has scaled up mining, damming, urbanization projects and other infrastructure across Tibet, environmental defenders have faced mounting persecution for their efforts.

In a [report](#) published in June 2022, the International Campaign for Tibet documented 50 known cases of Tibetans arbitrarily detained, arrested, tried and/or sentenced since 2008. Of the 50 documented cases, the prison sentences imposed on 35 of the individuals are known. The sentences range from one year and nine months to 21 years, with an average sentence length of nine years.

While it is difficult to conclude that nine years is the average sentence for all environmental defenders, it remains clear that prison sentences are long and environmental activism is severely punished by the state.

Warming at least twice as fast

This repression is particularly alarming given the critical role of Tibetan environmental defenders at a time when temperatures on the Tibetan Plateau are rising at least two times faster than the global average.

As the world's "Third Pole" and Asia's "water tower," the Tibetan Plateau holds the largest volume of frozen freshwater outside the polar regions and is the source of Asia's eight great rivers, ultimately sustaining the livelihoods of up to 1.4 billion people living downstream.

How climate change impacts the Tibetan Plateau, and whether local Tibetans are empowered to mitigate and adapt to the changes, are critical questions for the international community.

"If China is committed to tackle the impacts of climate change, it should refrain from persecuting environmental human rights defenders and release all nine [Tibetans] immediately," the UN experts said, adding they have been in contact with China's government regarding the issue.



ICT Europe
Funenpark 1D | 1018 AK
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
Phone: +31 (0)20 3308265
Fax: +31 (0)20 3308266
icteurope@savetibet.nl

ICT Deutschland e.V.
Schönhauser Allee 163 | 10435
Berlin, Germany
Phone: +49 (0)30 27879086
Fax: +49 (0)30 27879087
info@savetibet.de

ICT Brussels
11, rue de la linière | 1060
Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 (0)2 609 44 10
Fax: +32 (0)2 609 44 32
info@savetibet.eu