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Monks imprisoned for 10-13 years following self-immolation by Kirti monk

International Campaign for Tibet

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Three monks at Kirti monastery have been imprisoned for between 10 and 13 years for "intentional homicide" following the death of a young monk called Phuntsog who set himself on fire earlier this year as an act of protest against the crackdown in Tibet. The sentencing appears to be purely political; there is no evidence that the three monks had any involvement in Phuntsog's solitary act of self-immolation or subsequent death, other than possibly seeking to protect him from further harm before he died in hospital. One of the monks sentenced, Losang Tsonдру, is the uncle of the monk who died.

The U.S. government has expressed concern about the sentencing, stating earlier this week in response to a question following the trial of Losang Tsonдру that "It was unclear whether he was accorded the procedural rights to which he is entitled under China's Constitution and laws and under international standards." Reports from Tibetans in exile in contact with people in the region indicated that due legal process was not followed in all three cases, with the Tibetans unable to choose their own lawyer and the whereabouts of all three prisoners being withheld from their families upon detention. (August 29, State Department press briefing).

Kirti monk Losang Tenzin, age 22, was sentenced to 13 years imprisonment, and a Kirti monk also called Losang Tenzin (known too as Nak Ten) was sentenced to 10 years in prison by the Barkham (Chinese: Ma'erkang) County People's Court, Ngaba (Chinese: Aba) Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan province yesterday (August 30). On Monday (August 29), 46-year old Kirti monk Losang Tsonдру (named in the state media as Drongдру), who was detained on April 12, was sentenced to 11 years imprisonment by the same court. All three sentences were reported in the Chinese state media, with Xinhua reporting today that the two monks sentenced yesterday "plotted, instigated and assisted in the self-immolation of fellow monk Rigzin Phuntsog, causing his death" (Xinhua, August 31, 2011). The same article stated: "Drongдру was given the sentence because he hid the injured monk and prevented emergency treatment, causing delayed treatment and the subsequent death for his disciple and nephew, according to the verdict."

Mary Beth Markey, President of the International Campaign for Tibet, said: "These extreme sentences reflect the Kafka-esque nightmare Tibetans in Ngaba are living through, that is to say that they feel something evil and omnipotent hovering all around. By penalizing three monks who may only have attempted to protect Phuntsog following his desperate and solitary act, the Chinese government aims to deflect attention from the real reasons for the self-immolation, the intense repression in Ngaba."

Twenty-year old Kirti monk Phuntsog set himself on fire on March 16 in the town of Ngaba, Tibet, on the third anniversary of a major protest and crackdown at Kirti monastery. During his protest, Phuntsog was heard to shout slogans for the long life of the Dalai Lama. Police and security personnel extinguished the flames and were observed beating Phuntsog. According to the same sources, one of which was based on eyewitness testimony, Tibetans present at the scene – both monks and laypeople - intervened and managed to take Phuntsog away from the police, and back to Kirti monastery nearby.

Exiled Kirti monks told ICT: "When Phuntsog was taken back to the monastery, there was little hope of his surviving, but as he was not yet dead, there was still a chance. Without government permission, they knew the hospital would not take him. So the monks decided to give into the government so that he could be admitted to hospital. He passed away there at around 3 am local time on March 17." The monks' fears for Phuntsog's welfare if handed over to the authorities were well-founded; hospitals and clinics often refuse to admit Tibetans who have been involved in political protest, or arrest Tibetans who are hospitalized following such incidents. In at least one known case, a Tibetan has been tortured even while in hospital by security police ([ICT report on the death of Tendar after 20 days in hospital in Lhasa](#) [1]).

The charges of "intentional homicide" against other monks at Kirti were foreshadowed by official statements immediately following Phuntsog's death. The official state media account not only gave incorrect information about Phuntsog's identity, [but also claimed](#) [2]: "Shortly after he set himself on fire, a policeman on patrol found him, put out the flames and rushed him to a nearby hospital... But a group of monks from the Kirti Monastery forcibly took him out of the hospital later in the afternoon and hid him inside the monastery, regardless of his injuries." Officials who arrived at Kirti monastery on March 21 to begin an intensive "patriotic education" campaign repeated the false allegation made in the Chinese state media that monks had forcibly taken Phuntsog out of hospital and so were guilty of murder, according to exile sources.

Kirti monk Losang Tenzin, sentenced to 13 years in prison, is from Lota Tsang household in Chuklegabma of Cha township, Ngaba county (the Tibetan area of Amdo), and was arrested from the monastery on March 23. Kirti monks in exile told ICT that he did not confess to the charges against him, and his family were given no opportunity to hire a lawyer to defend him. His family had heard nothing of his whereabouts until they were informed of the court proceedings on August 28. Losang Tenzin has been a monk at Kirti since he was a teenager and belongs to the Tantric college.

Twenty-one year old Losang Tenzin (Nak Ten) of the Pema Tsang house in Naktsangma of Cha township, who was sentenced to 10 years in prison by the same court on the same date and on the same charge, had been arrested at the end of March. His family had no opportunity to appoint a lawyer to represent him, and were also only informed of the proceedings on August 28. Losang Tenzin has also been a Kirti monk since he was Barkham to attend. He has been a Kirti monk since a young age and belongs to the philosophy college.

Forty-six year old Kirti monk Losang Tsonдру, Phuntsog's uncle and one of his tutors, sentenced to 11 years imprisonment, was arrested on April 12 this year. There had been no news of him until the family were summoned to Barkham on Saturday (August 27) for the sentencing. Losang Tsonдру is from the Jarchen household in division 2 of Me'uruma township in Ngaba county. He and Phuntsog's elder brother Dargye were arrested on March 20 and detained for 5 days before being released. They were re-arrested together on April 12.

The Chinese state media have consistently and erroneously reported the age of Phuntsog, the monk who immolated himself, as 16. The authorities also [reported](#) [3] that he had a "history of epilepsy." This may be intended to give the impression that Phuntsog was a minor and not in full control of his actions. According to information received by ICT, the self-immolation was a solitary act in response to repressive policies on religion and in particular linked to the crackdown in the Ngaba area since 2008. ([For a detailed timeline see report dated August 17 by the Washington-based Congressional-Executive Commission on China.](#) [4])

The Congressional-Executive Commission on China [points out](#) [5] that if Phuntsog was 16 years old and became a Kirti monk in 2005, he would have been aged 10 when he joined the monastery, which is not generally permitted according to management measures on Tibetan Buddhist monasteries implemented from 2010 onwards.

In a response to a question from the press on August 29, a U.S. State Department spokesperson said the government was "concerned" by the conviction for "intentional homicide". The spokesperson also said: "We urge the Chinese government to ensure transparency and to uphold the procedural protections and rights to which Chinese citizens are entitled under China's Constitution and laws and under international standards. The U.S. government repeatedly has urged the Chinese government to allow access to Tibetan areas of China for both journalists and diplomats so accurate information can be reported. To resolve underlying grievances of China's Tibetan population, we urge Chinese leaders to address policies in Tibetan areas that have created tension and to protect Tibetans' unique linguistic, cultural and religious identity."

International Campaign for Tibet
1825 Jefferson Place NW | Washington, DC | 20036 | United States of America
Phone: (202) 785-1515 | Fax: (202) 785-4343 | info@savetibet.org
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