

Laogai in Tibet
Survivor Testimonies
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My name is Thupten Khetsun and I am 70 years old. I participated in the 1959 uprising in Tibet. I was arrested and imprisoned for 4 years for my role in the uprising. I experienced immense suffering while I was in prison. Upon release, I was labeled a class enemy and that label made it very difficult for me to survive as a normal member of the society.

Today, I would like to focus my talk on the following two main points:

1. The sheer volume of political prisoners in Tibet right after the China's occupation.
2. Tragic impacts of China's policies such as, 'Change through labor' and 'Change through political reeducation' on political prisoners.

First point: Number of political prisoners.

Prior to China's occupation of Tibet, there were only two prisons in Lhasa, neither of which ever held more than 20 prisoners at any given time. But after 1959, numerous prison camps were established across Tibet. Many prison camps including Tibet Garrison Prison, Taring prison, Drapchi, Norbu Linka prison, Sangyib prison, Ngachen prison and temporary detention centers were established in Lhasa. Each of these prisons held over 800 prisoners. Majority of the inmates were political prisoners.

In 1959, other than the elderly and children, majority of the Tibetan youth in Lhasa were arrested under a range of charges. Take my family as an example. While four of my family members including my maternal uncle, my older brother and sister, and I were imprisoned for carrying out peaceful protest against China; my mother was subjected to political reeducation outside of prison. Even within my immediate neighborhood, all the men in the families were arrested at some point in 1959. I believe this experience is representative of the grim situation across Tibet during that time. As many of you might already know, Tibet's population is only 6 million. Based on our small population, the percentage of Tibetans incarcerated at the time was one of the highest in the world.

Second point: Tragic impacts of China's policies on political prisoners.

The Central Tibetan Administration states that over 1.2 million Tibetans died as a direct result of Chinese occupation. I am convinced that a considerable percentage of that number is political prisoners. Many political prisoners died in their youth while in prison and there are many reasons for this being the case.

One of the reasons is that prisoners were fed very poorly. Speaking from my own experience, during my two years in Drapchi prison, we would get half a pound of roasted

barley and a light tea per day. Sometimes, instead of roasted barley, we would be fed a watery noodle soup per day. On top of our poor diet, we had to do hard physical labor. Each day, we had to either break open 30 big stones or a group of 18 prisoners had to make 4000 bricks. If the daily quota of work is not fulfilled, prisoners are subjected to beatings and tortures at the end of the day.

Additionally, there are no proper medical facilities to tend to prisoners' health. Finally, prisoners are also subjected to regular interrogations and most of the time, are tortured during interrogation sessions. Thus, many prisoners died in prison due to the above reasons. When I was in prison, there would be at least 4 to 5 deaths in prison per day. I remember very clearly this one day when both inmates sleeping on either side of me died during the night.

On top of the daily physical hardships, political prisoners had to sit through evening sessions of political reeducation, where prisoners would be encouraged to criticize one another. I believe that the tortures and sufferings Tibetan political prisoners faced under China are comparable to those of Jews under Nazi Germany.

The high rate of prisoners dying in prison was not unique only to prisons in Lhasa. For instance, while I was still at Drapchi prison, huge loads of clothes of dead prisoners from *Chang Tsa-la-Kha* were delivered to Drapchi. There were enough winter jackets in there for half the prisoners at Drapchi. This alone is indicative of the sheer number of prisoners who died at *Chang Tsa-la-Kha* within such a short duration. Another example is that I had a Tibetan Kashmiri friend in Lhasa who was sent to *Kongpo* labor camp from Drapchi prison for two years. He later told me that out of the 32 prisoners sent to *Kongpo* with him, only 12 survived the ordeal of hard labor camp there. He said majority of them died of starvation. Moreover, as per Shewoe, a former political prisoner, over 70% of prisoners sent to *Gansu Chu-chen* died within the first three years of prison sentence. Likewise, high rates of prison deaths were typical across the plateau.

My experiences and anecdotes might only speak to sufferings faced by prisoners in western Tibet, but I read many books by former political prisoners from eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo. It is clear from their books that political prisoners across the Tibetan plateau were subjected to extreme torture, indignity and sufferings. I am convinced that if we could conduct a thorough research on how many Tibetan political prisoners died as a direct result of torture and starvation, the numbers will shock us to the core.

Upon my release from prison after four years, the policy of 'One Smash and Three Antis' resulted in the deaths of many political prisoners. For example, during the Cultural Revolution, an anti-Chinese government organization was formed in *Nyenmo* county. The Chinese government reacted with utmost violence and swiftly arrested anyone remotely affiliated with the group or the group members. The government got rid of majority of the organization members with two mass executions in Lhasa, killing 17 and 32 people respectively. I can never forget the fear I felt during those mass executions.

Prior to the executions, there were mandatory public court hearings to discuss the crimes of those who were about to be killed. On the day of the mass execution, the prisoners were paraded around Lhasa on the back of military jeeps with high security around them. All the prisoners had placards hung around their neck stating their name, age and crime. Their hands were tied in the back and their heads forcefully bowed. The prisoners from *Nyenmo* county were made to stand in front of public for the whole duration of the two hour long mandatory public gathering before their executions. On top of mass executions, numerous other political prisoners were executed under the pretense of Chinese law across the plateau.

After being released from prison, I went to live in Kongpo. While I was there, I heard from my family members that another group of young men from Lhasa were labeled counter revolutionary and were executed in the same manner. When this group of young men was brought to the public court hearings, many of them were seen bleeding from their mouths. The officials made it mandatory for their family members to attend the court hearings. Afterwards, the immediate family members of the executed young men were called for meetings to confirm the righteousness of the government in killing their sons and were forced to thank the government for their noble action.

Many books by former Tibetan political prisoners attest to the fact that, during that time many prisoners were executed under the unfair law and many were covertly executed. Social and political conditions of Tibetans at the time were so grim that many Tibetans were driven to desperate measures of committing suicides. In a modest effort to document and raise awareness on Tibet's lack of freedom, I wrote a book on my experiences as a political prisoner called *Memories of Life in Lhasa under Chinese Rule*.

In conclusion, since the beginning of China's occupation of Tibet, Tibetans have experienced unimaginable sufferings and the current situation in Tibet continues to be just as harsh. Under these circumstances, as a Tibetan, I sincerely appreciate the generous support and interest many of you have shown in promoting Tibet's freedom.

Thank you.

