

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child
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Testimony of Ms. Ngawang Sangdrol

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Mr. Chairperson and distinguished Members of the Committee on the Rights of the Child,

I thank you all for giving me this rare opportunity to brief you about my personal experiences as a child in Chinese-occupied Tibet. I consider this testimony as a statement on behalf of all the children of Tibet, particularly those growing up in our homeland.

My name is Ngawang Sangdrol and I was born in Lhasa, Tibet's capital, in 1977. Like many as a child in Tibet, I grew up hearing about the experiences of Tibetans under China's domination and my own family's refusal to accept that alien rule. I was encouraged by my parent's determination and courage and shared their strength of feeling for our country. Due to my parents' deep religious convictions, at the age of 12, I happily joined Garu nunnery. My elder sister was already a nun.

From that age onwards, I began to see with my own eyes the truth of parent's stories, on how the Tibetans were persecuted by the Chinese authorities. Of course, the occupation of Tibet then turned into something very personal for me. Although a child, I became determined to do something, to resist in some way. I thought this was a right decision. One day some of the nuns were talking about making a protest against the Chinese rule at a large religious festival (called Shoton) at Norbu Lingka Palace in the Tibetan capital and I decided to join them. I was 13, and the youngest and smallest in our group of 13 nuns. We knew our protest would receive attention and that there would be many armed Chinese police at the location. On that day, 21 August 1990, we walked into the middle of the crowd and started shouting, 'Long Live His Holiness the Dalai Lama!' 'Independence for Tibet!'

Mr. Chairperson, almost immediately, Chinese police dragged us away. We were thrown into a truck and taken to Gutsa prison outside the city, where we were subjected to many days of violent interrogations. The prison guards told us we were 'counter-revolutionaries' who were trying to separate Tibet from China. The interrogators beat us with iron pipes and sometimes with electric cattle-prods. They attached live electric wires to our tongues. They even tied us up in a very painful 'airplane' position, where our hands were tied back and hung from the ceiling. It felt like my shoulders were being pulled out of their sockets. I was so small at that age that the guards could easily pick me up by my ankles, hang me upside-down and bounce my head off the concrete floor.

My parents were not informed of my arrest or detention and I was never officially charged with any crime. They found out where I was from neighbours, who had heard about the demonstration. For several months of my nine months detention at Gutsa Prison, I was deprived of family visits or contacts.

As a former political prisoner, after my release I wasn't allowed to return to my nunnery, my father, brother and uncle were also in prison and my mother passed away, and police would constantly harass my sister at home. At the age of 14, I was unable to continue my education and was without parents. But all the time I wanted to be involved in political activity, mainly because I had friends who were in prison, other nuns, who were still suffering, and I wanted to do something to show my solidarity with them. When I was about 15, I went with some other nuns to the Barkor area, the main Tibetan area of Lhasa. On that day, 17 June 1992, as soon as we began shouting for Tibet's freedom, the police took me away once again. When I was sentenced to 3 years.

Mr. Chairperson, I was charged for “incitement to subversive and separatist activities” and transferred to Tibet's 'Number One' prison, known as Drapchi, where I spent the remainder of my youth. I received no legal representations, whatsoever, during the entire period of my imprisonment. The regime there is hard when it came to force labour. Every day, we had a quota of work like wool-work, vegetable farms, knitting and picking human excrement for manure preparation. From the moment we woke up early in the morning we would have to work until we finished our quota, which often took us until late in the evening. If we didn't meet the targets set by prison officials, we were beaten, evening meal was withheld and visits by relatives were cancelled.

One reason for my sentence-extension (by six years) was because in 1993, 14 of us secretly recorded patriotic songs from our cell and the audio-tape was smuggled outside Tibet. Part of one of those songs said:

**“Looking from the window,
Seeing nothing but the sky
And the clouds that float in the sky,
Which I wish were my parents
We, the captured friends in spirit,
We might be the ones to fetch the jewel,
No matter how hard we are beaten
Our linked arms cannot be separated.”**

The other 13 nuns' sentences were increased from 5 to 9 years.

When I was 19 I was inflicted to six months of solitary confinement and my prison sentence was extended by 8 years in 1996. My sentences was again extended by 6 years following two prison protests at Drapchi in May 1998. In Drapchi Prison there is a “school house” that is always proudly shown to visiting foreign officials as an example of educating inmates in prison. In reality political prisoners do not receive any kind of proper education. I only set foot inside that building once - to be told that my prison sentence had been extended.

During imprisonment, I was deprived of food, beaten, tortured and deliberately exposed to extremes of temperature. As I moved from my youth to adulthood at the prison, I continued to protest against my imprisonment and the Chinese rule in Tibet. The consequences of my actions were always harsh and without restraint. I was finally released from Drapchi Prison on 17 October 2002, following an international campaign

on my behalf, including that from Heads of States of Western countries. Upon release with exception of being re-united with my family members, I enjoyed other rights. My official sentence was 23 years, of which I served 11. Five months after release I was allowed to travel into exile. I now live in the United States, learning English and working as a Human Rights Analyst for the International Campaign for Tibet in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Chairperson, I had no idea while I was in prison that I had individual rights both as a human being and as a child. We never knew that China's has so many obligations to the international community when it came to human rights observance. In Tibet, there is no distinction between man and woman, adult or child – each is treated as harshly, as brutally as the other. Apart from a few short years, I have spent my entire youth undergoing cruel treatment, being degraded, being denied basic human rights, being denied any education other than political indoctrination designed to break my human spirit. I lost both my parents and I lost my youth. There are perhaps many other things I have lost that I am not even aware of, since I have never had the chance to experience them. But I have no regrets. I believe in what I did in order to defend the rights of the six million Tibetan people.

Mr. Chairperson, I come before you today to share my personal experience, not because you can somehow repair what has been done to me. But as an importance committee of the UN tasked with the responsibility of protecting the rights of children everywhere, you must seriously consider what is being done to children and young people in Tibet. Young Tibetans are forced to choose between submitting to the Chinese authorities or retaining their religious, cultural and national identity. Even in their early schooling Tibetan children are ridiculed for their religious beliefs, told that their parents and grandparents beliefs are backward. They are told that Tibet has always been a part of China and made to denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama – they are brought up on a lie and anyone who challenges that lie faces abuse, discrimination or worse. Today in Tibet, to wish to protect your language, your culture, your religion is a crime that will either put you in prison or exclude from an education and a livelihood. This is how a Tibetan child must grow up in Tibet.

In conclusion, I am told that China ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992. When a State Party willfully harms the physical or mental development of a child, it not only degrades the individual child, but also the entire international system set up to protect them. I respectfully ask the Committee to ensure that China fulfills its legal obligations and put an end to the use of violence against and indoctrination of children as a tool of political control in Tibet. I appeal to you to raise concrete questions on Tibet to the Chinese authorities, including, as a matter of urgency, on the well-being and whereabouts of the young Panchen Lama of Tibet.

I thank you for your attention.