
WITH EVEREST ON OUR SIDE: A PERSONAL STORY OF A PUBLIC PROTEST

By Tenzin Dorjee

In April 2007, five activists from the U.S.-based Students for a Free Tibet staged an Olympics-related protest at the world's rooftop. Their protest came on the eve of an announcement that the Olympic torch would go through Tibet on its way to Beijing, the host of this year's Games. China's Foreign Ministry said the five were detained for "carrying out illegal activities aimed at splitting China," and were expelled to Nepal on April 27, 2007. Tenzin Dorjee describes his journey.

The Tibetan sky, usually famous for the millions of stars that light the night, was an empty black canvas. We looked south—a thick blanket of clouds had stolen what should have been a breathtaking, early-morning view of Mount Everest. Our hearts sank; this was the chosen day of our protest on Everest, and there was no Everest in sight. Even with all the forethought and preparation that had gone into planning this mission, the weather was one thing we had forgotten to take into account.

No one spoke as we trekked up the dirt road that led to Mount Everest Base Camp. In a final gasp for better weather, I began to recite a prayer that I learned as a child. Known as the Twenty-One Tara prayer, it was meant to invoke the goddess Tara. Halfway through the prayer, I realized that I had forgotten the other half. I have lived in New York for too long, I said to myself with regret. But I kept praying, in the hope that a half-prayer is better than no prayer. (Older Tibetans joke that this sort of incomplete recitation is a "limping Tara.")

Minutes before we arrived at base camp, the clouds began to move east as if someone was wiping them clean, revealing a million-dollar view of Everest. Soon

the sun appeared and painted the snowcapped peak a blazing orange. It was time.

We unfurled an 18-foot banner that read: "One World, One Dream, Free Tibet 2008." Lighting a torch to symbolize Tibetan freedom, I took off my hat and sang the Tibetan national anthem. It was the first time in many years that the Tibetan anthem was sung publicly on Tibetan soil. Standing at 17,000 feet above sea level, my lungs struggled for air and my voice trembled. I felt invincible.

Shannon, our heroic team leader,¹ was filming the event on a camera that transferred the images to our techie Jeff. Jeff was using a laptop and satellite technology to then send live feed of our protest to New York. After what seemed like about 20 minutes, we saw several Chinese officers running toward us, gesturing wildly to stop the protest. While they arrested the rest of us on the spot, Jeff was able to take the camera along with the tape and make a hasty escape, outrunning the Chinese officers who chased him downhill.

The Chinese authorities seemed genuinely bewildered by our protest. They kept looking at the Chinese writing on the banner—*Xizang Duli* (Free Tibet)—and shook their heads in disbelief. Their initial hostility toward me, the only Tibetan on the team, was quickly replaced by a distant politeness once they realized that I was also an American citizen just like the white American team members.

The officers detained us in their base camp office building, confiscating the banner, the torch, and our cameras.

They began an intense search for “the missing tape.” *Where is the tape? Where is the tape?* Little did they realize that the images of the protest had already made their way into the world’s news headlines.

The base camp officers interrogated us incessantly from the time of arrest—roughly 9:00 a.m.—until late evening. “Who gave us the permit to enter the Tibetan Autonomous Region? Who made the banner? And who the hell made the ‘fire alarm?’” After hours of confusion, it became clear that “fire alarm” referred to the torch.

In the evening the Shigatse Public Security Bureau (PSB) arrived in a long convoy of land cruisers. The team included about forty armed officers and soldiers. The PSB drove us away from the base camp, taking us on a long and bumpy descent through the rugged Tibetan plateau in the dead of night. They were taking us inland into the country to Shigatse, the district capital.

Along the road, the convoy stopped at a police station every couple of hours. They took us into the dimly lit buildings, interrogated us in separate rooms, and then put us back in the cars to resume the journey. The night felt longer and darker as the road grew smoother. By dawn the Himalayas were far behind and we were approaching Shigatse.

When we arrived in Shigatse the next morning, we had spent nearly 24 hours in captivity. The parking lot of the Shigatse district office was buzzing with uniformed officers, who looked at us with curiosity and contempt. Suddenly our minders, who had worn the most solemn expression till then, put on a smiling face and asked us to join them for breakfast. This unexpected change in their behavior made us suspicious. They hadn’t given us anything to eat since the time of our arrest. Why did they want to feed us now?

My teammate Kirsten, a Colorado native, had been advised not to eat anything the Chinese authorities gave her. (There are many stories about Tibetans being poisoned by Chinese authorities for participating in independence activities.) The waiters in the restaurant organized a lavish spread of food on the table, but none of us wanted to touch it. The officers, sitting between each of us so that we couldn’t talk to each other, began to urge us on: “You must eat. You must eat now.”

Finally, as hunger overtook our sense of caution, we gave in to the temptation of steamy dumplings and hot tea. As soon as the food touched our lips, a barrage of cameramen burst into the restaurant. Cameras flashed from all directions. Now nobody could say that the American detainees were subjected to starvation.

A freeze frame from the video feed of the protest, showing the banner. Courtesy of Students For A Free Tibet.



After breakfast they stationed us in the Shigatse district office, one person to a room. At Shigatse, the interrogation continued at a much higher level of professionalism. “Who gave you the permit to enter the Tibetan Autonomous Region? Where did you stay in Lhasa? How much was the bus ticket from Lhasa to Shigatse? How many hours did it take to get from one place to the next?”

I was asked page after page of questions, and made to sign my name and put my fingerprint next to every answer I gave. My interrogator kept saying to me, “Remember, Tenzin, you must tell us the truth. You’re legally responsible for everything you say on this paper.” This made me laugh. In a country with no rule of law, where the government is the greatest criminal, what did “legally responsible” really mean?

As night fell, the interrogators were exhausted. They wanted to go home. So they told me I should go to sleep. I turned the lights out, put my head to the pillow, and realized I hadn’t slept for nearly two days. But the minute I closed my eyes, there was a knock on the door. It was the same officers. They stormed in and turned the lights on, waking me up to yet another round of midnight interrogation.

By morning I was beginning to wonder how long this would go on. Would they keep us in the same building or would they take us to another place? Would they transfer us to a prison? Shigatse, after all, is the place where all Tibetans captured at the Nepal border are brought to and imprisoned.

The officer who was interrogating me came in and said, “You broke China’s law. So you’re being given a small punishment.” This sent a chill down my spine—a small punishment by Chinese standards could be a big punishment! She handed me my passport. On the last page of the passport, there was a piece of paper that looked like a visa. It read: “Expelled from China. To be expelled by April 29, 2007.” Within minutes, we were on the road to Nepal, escorted by over 40 officers in nine cars. After eight hours of driving on the same Himalayan highway, we arrived at the Nepal border. I was overwhelmed with happiness and relief at seeing

all the other members of our team—Kirsten, Shannon, Jeff, and Laurel. Jeff, who had escaped on the first day, was caught the next day and brought to Shigatse too.

I felt a surge of gratitude for these non-Tibetan friends who had risked their lives to support the Tibetan people. Their contribution was so selfless and generous that I developed a natural sense of respect and admiration for them, although I had met them for the first time just days before. Even the Chinese authorities were helplessly confused by the fact that these people were willing to go to such lengths to support the Tibetan freedom struggle.

As we stood on the Tibetan side of the Friendship Bridge, we hugged each other and laughed and joked about our experiences. The Chinese officers wanted to photograph us, so we put our arms around each other and made peace signs with our fingers. But the officers admonished us: “Stop smiling. You must look sad.”

A short and stout man in an officer’s uniform emerged out of nowhere and scolded us in English. He wagged his finger at us and froze into that position artificially—and the cameras flashed again.

We walked on the Friendship Bridge and entered Nepal. The moment I crossed the line into Nepal, I could feel the freedom in the air. My body felt light as if a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I saw Nepalese kids smiling and laughing and playing, as if they had no fear of the armed Chinese soldiers just a few yards away. The grass was greener and the sun warmer. Freedom never felt so good. I now understood why thousands of Tibetans cross the highest mountains on earth every year, risking frostbite and death, to escape into Nepal, where an uncertain future awaits.

Note

1. Editor’s Note: The protest team consisted of Kirsten Westby, Mac Sutherland, Jeff Friesen, Shannon Service, and Tenzin Dorjee, the first known exiled Tibetan to return to the region to protest.