

## Respected Tibetan lama handed prison sentence in Sichuan

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China has sentenced a respected Tibetan lama to eight-and-a-half years in jail for illegal land occupation and ammunition possession, possibly the first senior Buddhist leader tried on serious charges linked to riots in 2008 in the Tibetan capital, a lawyer said on Thursday.

A court in Sichuan Province, bordering Tibet, convicted Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche, who headed a convent in Ganzi, a predominantly Tibetan prefecture in the province, Beijing-based attorney Jiang Tianyong (江天勇) said.

Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche is a Buddhist priest, or lama, and is highly respected. He was arrested on May 18, 2008, just days after more than 80 nuns in Ganzi held a demonstration against an official campaign to impose “patriotic re-education” on their convents, in which they were required to denounce Tibet’s spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.

The International Campaign for Tibet, an activist group, has described Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche as a “deeply respected local figure known for his work in the community” — including the building of a center for the aged and two clinics in Ganzi prefecture — whose detention aroused deep resentment among local Tibetans.

The sentence was handed down on Dec. 23, eight months after the monk first went on trial in April, after authorities said they found a pistol and more than 100 bullets under a bed in his living room.

His lawyers said he was forced into making a confession following a four-day police interrogation and threats to detain his family.

The 53-year-old monk had faced up to 15 years in jail.

Jiang, one of two attorneys who advised the monk from early in the case, said he had pleaded not guilty to the charges. The court did not allow Jiang and Li Fangping (李方平), another well-known activist lawyer, to represent the monk in later trial sessions, Jiang said.

“We don’t believe there was sufficient evidence to convict him on either of the charges,” Jiang said.

Phurbu Tsering Rinpoche was sentenced to more than seven years in jail on the charge of illegal expropriation of land, which was related to the center for the aged he set up. The monk says the land was given to him lawfully.

The court sentenced him to another one-and-a-half years for possession of ammunition.

Jiang said that the lawyers and the monk’s family believed he should appeal for a lighter sentence.

“We don’t know if he will appeal. I think he has lost confidence in China’s courts since this

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case,” Jiang said.

A rugged, deeply Buddhist region filled with monasteries and nunneries, Ganzi is known for its strong Tibetan identity and has been at the center of dissent for years. It saw some of the most violent protests in spring 2008.

Rioting that broke out in Lhasa on March 14, 2008, led to the most sustained Tibetan uprising against Chinese rule in decades. The violence in the capital killed 22 people, according to Chinese officials.

Beijing says the demonstrations were part of a violent campaign organized by the Dalai Lama and his supporters to throw off Chinese rule in Tibet and sabotage the Beijing Olympics in August 2008.

The Dalai Lama has denied the charge and says he seeks only significant autonomy for Tibet under continued Chinese rule.

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