

# The Boston Globe

## **Detained Newton Man Gravely Hurt In China**

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Date: August 21, 1999

HONG KONG -- A Newton man detained by authorities last Sunday in a remote area of China was gravely injured while in custody, his wife learned yesterday from US Embassy officials who reached the location.

Chinese officials said Daja Mizu Meston, 29, who was in remote Qinghai province to research a controversial development project funded by the World Bank, had jumped from the third story of the building where he was held after being detained early this week along with an Australian scholar. His wife, Phuntsok, and friends said they believe Meston was probably pushed or was the victim of a beating.

She said embassy officials informed her that Meston had suffered broken vertebrae and liver damage and was bleeding internally, but was in stable condition. His spleen was reportedly removed in emergency surgery and he had been unconscious, his distraught wife said from their home in the Auburndale section of Newton.

Later, she said she and a family friend would leave today for Hong Kong or Beijing, hoping to reach Qinghai and if necessary to get better medical care for her husband.

"I would walk across the world to get to where he is," said Phuntsok, a Tibetan exile who has been married to Daja for 10 years. "I feel he needs to be surrounded by people who love him. I think I have to be there with him."

A State Department spokesman confirmed that a team of US diplomats traveled to Qinghai province last night and visited Meston. In Beijing and Washington, US officials demanded Meston's release and expressed their "serious concern about the American citizen's detention and injuries," said the spokesman, but said privacy laws prevented disclosure of Meston's injuries.

"When I heard, I was terrified. Either he was in such a state of mind that he was irrational -- but he is not such a person," said his wife. "There must be other causes of his injuries. Maybe they pushed him."

She was also upset that it took so long to learn that Meston had been seriously injured.

"I just cannot believe the Chinese wouldn't tell the American Embassy earlier how seriously hurt he was," she said.

Chinese authorities said that Meston had been "severely injured" but was "out of danger after emergency treatment." The Chinese did not indicate when he would be released.

US Representative Barney Frank, whose district includes the Mestons' Newton home, called on Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and the World Bank to demand the release of both men.

"I believe the US government should make it clear to China that no further relations can go forward in the absence of these men being released," said a statement issued by Frank, a Democrat and one of a number of critics of the Chinese resettlement project and the World Bank's controversial decision to help finance it. He noted that China has a history of harshly suppressing dissent, especially in Tibetan areas.

Frank was unaware of Meston's injuries when he sent the letters, said spokeswoman Dottie Reichard. She said Frank was traveling on vacation yesterday and could not be reached.

Representative Frank Wolf, a Virginia Republican who used Meston as a translator during a 1997 trip to China, was "shocked and saddened" to hear of his injuries, spokeswoman Rosanne Dupras said.

"The congressman is very concerned about Daja," Dupras said. "We want the US to do everything to get him home as soon as possible."

World Bank spokesman Peter Stephens said the bank will not make any decisions on going forward with the project until bank officials have full information on Meston's condition.

"The news of Mr. Meston's condition is awful and shocking," Stephens said. "We are very saddened. But given that some information is unclear, it's hard for us to make any decisions now on the project."

Daja Meston, an American by birth, was raised by his parents in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Nepal and speaks fluent Tibetan. Known as Wangchuk to his Tibetan friends, he is a sociology graduate of Brandeis University and an aspiring researcher on Tibetan economic development.

Meston was detained along with an Australian scholar, Gabriel Lafitte, 50. The two were said to be researching China's plan to relocate more than 55,000 ethnic Chinese and Muslim farmers to a traditionally Tibetan and Mongolian area of western Qinghai province.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao last night said the two men were detained for "illegal covering and photographing in closed areas." Chinese public security officials said the men "candidly confessed their illegal activities" -- an alleged admission that Meston's wife said must have been made under duress.

The project divided the World Bank's board of directors and has been condemned by a variety of critics, including the Boston Globe's editorial page. For the first time in the bank's history, the board voted to go ahead with funding the project despite official opposition from the US government.

At the time of the June 24 World Bank vote, Chinese authorities said outside politicians, journalists, nongovernmental organizations, and "legitimate" individuals were welcome to visit the area "unattended by Chinese officials." But the only journalists allowed to visit so far were required to be part of an escorted tour. Two weeks later, Meston and Lafitte, the first independent researchers known to have ventured to Qinghai, were detained.

Zhu, the Chinese spokesman, said last night that the men "were neither entrusted by the World Bank nor invited by the relevant Chinese departments."

Phuntsok Meston broke down in tears on the phone yesterday, asking: "Why have they arrested him, for what? This is just an example of how the Chinese government functions -- they say one thing and do something else.

Unfortunately, this time it had to be my husband and Gabriel who pay the consequences."

Lafitte's wife, Helen Verran, interviewed by telephone from Melbourne, said her husband had traveled to Qinghai last year to do research, and has "always gone on a tourist visa. Other people interested in the World Bank project were advised . . . there's no need for an invitation."

The Australian Embassy in Beijing said Lafitte had forwarded a letter through Chinese police saying he was well and "did not require any assistance from the embassy." An Australian spokesman told Reuters that the embassy had verified the contents of the letter in a telephone call with Lafitte.