

The Boston Globe

Mass. Researcher, 'In Good Spirits,' In Hong Kong For Treatment

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Date: August 27, 1999

WASHINGTON -- Badly injured but "in good spirits," Newton researcher Daja Meston arrived safely in Hong Kong for medical treatment yesterday, after Chinese authorities had forced him to confess that he had entered a "restricted area" and to apologize for it, sources said yesterday.

Meston, 29, a Tibetan scholar, was also barred from returning to China for five years, the State Department said. Meston was conducting research in Qinghai province, the site of a highly controversial World Bank program to resettle poor farmers.

After what Meston associates say was several days of interrogation by Chinese security in a hotel room, Meston fell from a third-story window. There is no evidence that he was tortured.

In the fall, which Chinese officials say was part of an escape attempt, Meston broke vertebrae in his back and suffered internal injuries that made it necessary to remove his spleen.

Meston was transported by medical helicopter to Hong Kong and is expected to return to the Boston area when he is physically able. "I think it depends on his health condition," a high-ranking diplomatic source said.

Meston "is in good spirits," said Dana Clark of the Washington-based Center for International Environmental Law, which has been battling the World Bank project. However, moving Meston is a delicate task because of the severity of his injuries, said Lisa Jordan of the Washington-based Bank Information Center, which has been raising money for Meston's enormous medical bills.

The center, which assists nongovernmental organizations, has raised \$58,000 for Meston, who does not have health insurance. The group says it could take

months for Meston to recover, and the cost just to transport him back to Boston could be as high as \$100,000.

Meston, who was born in Tibet but is a US citizen, was detained by Chinese authorities on Aug. 15 with another researcher, Australian Gabriel Lafitte, and Tsering Dorje, an ethnic Tibetan and Chinese national.

Lafitte was released last week after he said he had been interrogated repeatedly by Chinese police. Dorje's whereabouts are unknown, and supporters fear the man may be treated worse because of his ethnic Tibetan background.

"I am to blame for the entire situation," Lafitte said gravely from his home in Melbourne. "The only reason Dorje is in trouble is because of me.

"Dorje knows nothing of the World Bank, of the World Bank project, of my background, or of Daja Meston's background," said Lafitte, who had undergone what he called "extreme mental cruelty" while under Chinese detention.

It's "extremely common for Tibetan detainees to be tortured," said Kate Saunders of the London-based Tibet Information Network.

Meston was looking into the effect of a World Bank proposal to move 58,000 impoverished farmers to a plateau area now sparsely occupied by mainly ethnic Tibetans.

The project would make the area majority Chinese.

Others oppose the project because of its possible damage to the environment. Foes of the plan have scheduled a protest rally in front of the World Bank's Washington office on Monday.

There is still a chance that the project could be stopped, World Bank officials say, since the funding has not been finally approved. But moving the people is meant to alleviate poverty, not to stir up ethnic trouble, said World Bank spokeswoman Melissa Fossberg.

"These people in this area are the poorest of the poor," Fossberg said, and may have a better life if they are moved to an area where they can farm.