

U.S. Asks China for Researcher Tibetan Advocate Suffered Broken Back in Mysterious Fall

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American officials have told their Chinese counterparts in Washington and Beijing that they want to transport home a detained U.S. citizen the moment U.S. doctors determine that it is safe for him to travel, two official sources said.

Daja Meston suffered a broken back and severe internal organ damage when he fell from a third-story window while in Chinese custody this week, according to an official source with knowledge of his condition. He was detained on Sunday for traveling without authorization to investigate a controversial World Bank project.

A team of U.S. Embassy officials examined Meston, 29, today in Xining, the capital of Qinghai province. He spoke haltingly through an oxygen mask. Several of Meston's vertebrae were broken, but the extent of the damage to his spine was not known. He has some movement in his toes, the official source said.

The circumstances surrounding Meston's fall remain murky. China told U.S. officials on Thursday that Meston jumped while attempting to escape, and China's state media restated that explanation today.

But U.S. officials were hoping to determine whether Meston could have been the victim of abuse. A State Department official refused to comment today on the cause of the fall.

Meston was detained along with an Australian scholar, Gabriel Lafitte. The men were doing independent research on a World Bank plan to fund the resettlement of 58,000 impoverished farmers to an area with better agricultural prospects. Tibetan rights groups say the project would dilute the Tibetan population in remote Dulan county and harm the environment, and the bank voted in June to delay funding.

"Basically what he was doing was looking at the World Bank project out there. . . . He didn't have permission from the Chinese and the Chinese arrested them," said one official. "It's the Chinese version of trespassing, or something like that."

The New China News Agency today accused the men of "illegal covering and photographing in closed areas where clearly marked restriction signs were posted." It said the men "candidly confessed their illegal activities."

Chinese officials have hinted that they may release the men to the team of American officials soon, an official Western source said.

Meston, who grew up in a Tibetan monastery in Nepal, was the translator for Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-Va.) during an unauthorized fact-finding mission to Tibet in 1997 that resulted in a scalding critique of China's human rights abuses. Wolf has written to President Clinton appealing for help in securing Meston's release.

"Mr. Meston is a good person and a native-born American citizen {who is} known for his advocacy on behalf of the people of Tibet," Wolf wrote.

Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) wrote to World Bank President James Wolfensohn requesting that he intervene. Spokesman Peter Stephens said the World Bank has engaged in high-level contacts in China on behalf of the two men.

One official said China's Foreign Ministry is "appalled" at the turn of events in Qinghai province. He added that there was some concern that the local officials in Qinghai are outside Beijing's control: It's "the equivalent of the redneck sheriff just sort of taking out the billy club and laying into people and saying he runs the town."

Credit: Washington Post Foreign Service