



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Tibetan "Unchain the Truth" campaign for prisoner release, 2013-2014

**Time period notes:** *Occurred during the 2008 Tibetan Unrest (series of riots, protests, and demonstrations beginning in Tibet)*

October 25th

2013

to: June 5th

2014

**Country:** China

**Country:** Japan

**Country:** Brazil

**Country:** Austria

**Country:** United Kingdom

**Country:** United States

**Country:** Switzerland

**Country:** Bulgaria

**Country:** India

**Country:** Costa Rica

**Country:** Germany

**Location Description:** *International (campaign based online)*

**Goals:**

Safe return of filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen from prison on June 5th, 2014

## Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 006. Group or mass petitions › Signatures to present to the prison director on 10 December, 2013
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Paper cranes
- 034. Vigils
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 006. Group or mass petitions › Signatures to present to the prison director on 10 December, 2013
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Paper cranes
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### **Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Paper cranes
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### **Methods in 4th segment:**

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 015. Group lobbying
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Paper cranes
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### **Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 015. Group lobbying
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Paper cranes
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

### **Methods in 6th segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 021. Delivering symbolic objects › Paper cranes
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

## **Classifications**

### **Classification:**

Change

### **Cluster:**

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

### **Group characterization:**

- International supporters of Tibet/freedom of expression

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

### **Leaders:**

Unchain the Truth (organizing group made up of friends and family of Wangchen), Lhamo Tso (wife of Wangchen), Filming for Tibet (Wangpo Tethong; spokesperson)

### **Partners:**

Amnesty International, Students for a Free Tibet Poland/UK/Bulgaria, Bhö-JÖ Tibeter Jugend Österreich', Swiss Tibetan Friendship Association, Jamyang Tsultrim

### **External allies:**

The Committee to Protect Journalists, World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers

### **Involvement of social elites:**

Yoko Ono, his Holiness the Dalai Lama

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

### Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bhö-JÖ Tibeter Jugend Österreich
- Committee to Protect Journalists
- Filming for Tibet
- Students for a Free Tibet Poland/UK/Bulgaria
- Unchain the Truth

### Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Amnesty International
- Tibetan Youth Association

### Groups in 3rd Segment:

### Groups in 4th Segment:

- Amnesty International Group (St. Gallen)
- Swiss Tibet Friendship Assoc

### Groups in 5th Segment:

### Groups in 6th Segment:

- International Tibet Network
- Tibet Initiative Deutschland

**Segment Length:** 37 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

The Chinese government and prison director

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

### Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

### Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

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In August of 2008, Tibetan filmmaker Dhondup Wangchen was premiering his new documentary, “Leaving Fear Behind”, to a group of journalists in a Beijing hotel when Chinese police interrupted and forcibly shut down the screening. The film’s content

featured interviews of Tibetans criticizing the location of the upcoming Beijing Olympics, exposing abuses of the Chinese government against the Tibetan people, and praising the Dalai Lama; enough for Wangchen to be charged with “inciting separatism.” He was arrested alongside his filming assistant, senior monk Jigme Gyatso, and sentenced to six years imprisonment. Fearing for the safety of his family, Wangchen sent his wife and children to live in India while he was in Xining City Detention Centre and Labor Camp. While detained, prison guards allegedly beat him, put him in solitary confinement, and deprived him of food. Wangchen contracted Hepatitis B and officials refused him medical attention. Amnesty International aided his wife, Lhamo Tso, by arranging a visa to tour countries around the world to solicit support and advocate for her husband’s early release.

After five years of imprisonment and an expected release date of 25 March, 2014, the judge for the case postponed Wangchen’s release until June 2014. Angered and fearful that Wangchen’s release would continue to be stalled, Tso, friends and family of Wangchen, and the organization Filming for Tibet started the “Unchain the Truth” campaign. At the Zurich film festival on 29 October, an animation debuted that featured hands, bound by chains, breaking free and symbolically forming into a bird. According to an ancient Japanese legend, “anyone who folds a thousand origami cranes will be granted a wish by a crane.” The Unchain the Truth organizing group stated to the film festival attendees that their wish was for Wangchen to be safely reunited with his family. The group began instructing the crowd how to create the paper birds. That same day, members of the group in Dharamsala also held a crane-making event, inviting everyone in any country to begin making birds to present on 10 December, International Human Rights Day. Additionally, friends started a petition on [www.unchain-the-truth.com](http://www.unchain-the-truth.com) [3] to collect signatures advocating for Wangchen, which would be presented to the prison director on 10 December.

As the campaign spread internationally, pro-Tibet groups began organizing events in collaboration with the campaign, such as a video screening of the documentary in Brazil and awareness events by Students for a Free Tibet in Poland. On 3 December, Students for a Free Tibet UK held a public vigil focused on the film-maker in London. On 7 December, a peaceful demonstration to raise awareness was held in a busy square of Tokyo. Young Tibetans of the group Bhö-JÖ Tibeter Jugend Österreich held events in Austria, and Friends of Tibet organized film screenings throughout Bulgaria.

International Human Right’s Day began with the placing of over 200 paper birds in the Swiss Parliament for a meeting with the Austrian Foreign Ministry. Activists handed other birds over to filmmakers, politicians, and NGO decision makers asking them to support Wangchen and the political prisoners of Tibet that he represents. Still hundreds of others were sent directly to the director of the prison in Tibet, alongside the petition. Pictures of simultaneous events were sent to Unchain the Truth, including locations of Costa Rica, India , Germany, Poland, UK, Brazil, USA, Australia, Bulgaria, and Japan.

In America, Lhamo Tso worked with activists in San Francisco to create awareness in front of the Chinese consulate. Amnesty International released statements calling for Wangchen’s safety and prioritizing fair release, and the Huffington post released a supportive article in hopes of reaching a wide audience. Activists at the First Unitarian Church of Providence, Rhode Island wrote about 400 letters by hand to send to the jail and Chinese government. Unchain the Truth announced a day of "giveaways" to occur on 22 March 2014, encouraging activists to present as many birds as possible to friends and strangers alike.

On 10 February, his Holiness the Dalai Lama met with Wangchen’s four children to voice his support for Unchain the Truth. On 5 March, the children were permitted to enter America as political refugees, and were reunited with their mother Tso after 18 months of separation. The family, minus Wangchen, made public appearances at rallies throughout the United States. On 10 March, Students for a Free Tibet held public rallies in New York City and San Francisco. On 15 March, the St. Gallen chapter of Amnesty International in Switzerland brought paper and instructions to make the origami cranes for the annual Swiss Tibetan Friendship Association general body meeting. The group asked participants to create birds during the meeting, and by the end of the meeting, hundreds of birds were prepared to send to Lhamo Tso. On 20 March, the campaign leaders rejoiced when the US government called on Wangchen's release at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva by saying that “we are deeply concerned...by government policies in ethnic Uighur, Tibetan, and Mongolian areas of China that have contributed to unrest as well as the ongoing detention of Dhondup Wangchen.” Soon after in Brazil, 1,000 freedom birds were made in one sitting.

On 25 March, friends of Wangchen in Tibet positioned origami birds of freedom directly in front of the prison in Xining, along

with a banner saying “Thank You” to supporters of Wangchen around the world. Applauded as a courageous act of protest on unchain-the-truth.com, a photo of the birds and banner was noted as potentially the “first action ever in front of a prison or labour camp where Tibetan political prisoners are being held.”

On 26 March, Wangchen's cousin and former Tibetan political prisoner Jamyang Tsultrim spoke at the UN in Geneva to address different countries about the current state of Tibetan political prisoners such as his cousin and Golog Jigme. On 28 March, Students for a Free Tibet held a rally and collected signatures in Union Square, New York City. On 4 April, the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers in collaboration with Unchain the Truth announced a "30 Days for Freedom" countdown, which featured different activists every day speaking on behalf of Wangchen and freedom of political expression. The Committee to Protect Journalists called upon the Chinese government to release all unfairly imprisoned journalists and filmmakers. On that day, Unchain the Truth excitedly announced that Wangchen was to be awarded the 2014 Václav Havel Prize for Creative Dissent by the Human Rights Foundation on 2 May.

On 18 May, Golog Jigme left prison and safely arrived in Dharamsala. Less than a month later, on 5 June, Dhondup Wangchen was also finally released from prison. He was reunited with his family and expressed gratitude for the international campaign that advocated on his behalf.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

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- [2] <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/included-participation-more-one-social-class>
- [3] <http://www.unchain-the-truth.com>