

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

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Myanmar: Authorities must allow peaceful demonstrations

As of today, it is estimated that over 150 protestors have been arrested by police and members of the state-sponsored Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA). Since 19 August, small groups of peaceful protesters have demonstrated almost daily in the capital Yangon and other parts of the country, in reaction to a sudden state imposed rise in fuel prices.

Beatings and intimidation by members of the USDA and paramilitary group “Swan Arr Shin” have been reported in many of the recent rallies and arrests. Journalists have been prevented from reporting on events, and the authorities have ordered National League for Democracy (NLD) youth members in certain districts not to gather while demanding other protestors sign documents pledging they would not join further rallies.

Amnesty International urges the Myanmar authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all those detained, unless they are to be charged with a criminal offence, and a court has decided on their continued detention. The organization further calls on the Myanmar authorities to allow peaceful demonstrators to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and assembly without fear of arrest or violence.

Protestors are being detained at four locations. Over 50 protestors are detained at the Kyaikkasan Detention Center, some at Shwe Pyithar Police Regiment. Most members of the 88 Generation Students Group are detained at Insein Prison, with one at a detention center in Mingaladon Township. Family members of detainees have not been informed by authorities about the arrests of their family members and their whereabouts. None of the detainees are known to have been charged with any offence, nor have they been allowed access to lawyers. The detainees have all been held in detention long beyond the 24 hour period admissible under Myanmar law. Court orders would have to be obtained for the continuation of detention beyond a 24 hour period.

Among the first to be detained in this latest crackdown on peaceful political dissent were 14 prominent activists of the 88 Generation Students Group, who, according to the state-run newspaper New Light of Myanmar on 24 August, were undergoing interrogation.

Amnesty International urges the Myanmar authorities to immediately provide adequate medical care to Ye Thein Naing, whose leg was allegedly broken by USDA during a rally on 28 August. Fellow detainees continue a hunger strike in Kyaikkasan Detention Centre in Yangon, demanding medical treatment for Ye Thein Naing.

Amnesty International is concerned that detainees are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment, which is commonly reported during interrogation and pre-trial detention in Myanmar. Amnesty International urges that pending their release, detainees be held in only official places of detention, and are granted immediate access to lawyers, family, courts and any necessary medical treatment. The authorities should also ensure that none are tortured or ill-treated in detention, and provide medical care for those injured during the violent break-up of demonstrations.

Amnesty International calls on the Myanmar authorities to fulfil their duty to investigate all reports of violence, ill-treatment and intimidation of protestors and journalists, and to bring those perpetrators to justice in trials consistent with international standards of fairness.

Background

Amnesty International has long-standing concerns at the deprivation of basic rights in detention in Myanmar. Laws criminalise peaceful expression of political dissent. People are frequently arrested without warrant and held incommunicado. Torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment are common during interrogation and pre-trial detention. Proceedings against political detainees have failed to meet international standards of fairness. Defendants are often denied the right to legal counsel or to legal counsel of their own choice. Prosecutors have relied on confessions extracted through torture.

On 14 August, the Myanmar authorities raised petrol prices by two-thirds, doubled diesel prices and raised the cost of compressed natural gas five-fold. The sudden price increases left many unable to afford bus fares to get to work and to purchase essential commodities such as rice. A string of peaceful protest rallies against the price increases ensued in different parts of the country. Some of the protesters have also called for the release of detained political activists and an end to the protracted political deadlock in the country.

Myanmar authorities have accused the 88 Generation Students Group of committing “terrorist and subversive acts” and of violating Law 5/96. Amnesty International is concerned that the vague and sweeping provisions of Law 5/96 criminalize the peaceful expression of political beliefs, and has previously called for its repeal.

Detained leaders of the 88 Generation Students Group include former prisoners of conscience Paw U Tun, also known as Min Ko Naing, and Ko Ko Gyi, who both spent up to 15 years in prison for their part in the major 1988 demonstrations. They were released in 2004 and 2005 respectively. They had been among the few remaining leaders of the political opposition still at liberty in Myanmar, where the majority of senior opposition politicians are imprisoned or under house arrest on account of their peaceful activities.