

AI INDEX: ASA 16/20/98

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT Friday 7 August 1998

Myanmar: 10th anniversary of military repression

August 8 marks 10 years of oppression in Myanmar by a military government which killed thousands of civilians in seizing power, and has since killed, tortured, raped, imprisoned and forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of Burmese people.

“Tomorrow’s anniversary marks not just 10 years of suffering for Burma’s people - it marks a decade of struggle against all odds for basic human rights and fundamental freedoms,” Amnesty International said. “It is also time for the international community to recommit itself to supporting the Burmese people in their cause.”

Amnesty International called on the Myanmar authorities to release prisoners of conscience as a sign that it is serious about improving the country’s human rights record. It highlighted 10 individuals from among more than a thousand political prisoners who warrant special humanitarian consideration.

“Some of these men and women have spent almost 10 years in prison for no more than writing letters and handing out leaflets. Most of them are physically broken by their experience in prison. Why is the government so scared of them?” Amnesty International said.

“The release of prisoners would help to defuse rising tensions, build public confidence and show a degree of good faith to the international community.”

Amnesty International also urged the Myanmar government to bring prison conditions in line with international standards, halt unlawful killings, cease harassment of opposition members, stop forcible relocations on ethnic grounds, and end forced pottering and the ill-treatment of forced labourers.

The 10th anniversary of the military crackdown is also an important time for other governments to reflect on their failure to bring about change in Myanmar, Amnesty International said.

“For all the statements, for all the sanctions, for all the promises of engagement producing results, things in Myanmar have only got worse,” Amnesty International said. “And it’s not difficult to see why.”

“Myanmar has continued to receive comfort from China, from its ASEAN partners, and from companies and investors willing to keep their mouths shut while doing business there,” Amnesty International said. “The time has come for other governments to make this an issue with each other, not just with the generals in Yangon. Genuine concerted action by all parts of the international community could turn this situation around.”

The organization called on other governments to ensure the human rights situation in Myanmar remained on the agenda at all international and regional meetings, to press the Myanmar

government for the release of prisoners and access for the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Myanmar, and to ensure that any investment in Myanmar does not lead to further human rights violations -- in particular investments in projects using forced labour.

Background

In Myanmar, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) government continues to ruthlessly crack down on dissent -- with more than 1,200 long-term political prisoners, and constant arrests and intimidation of students and opposition members. They include Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which won 82% of the seats held in the 1990 elections which the military refused to recognize.

The harassment has continued right up to the anniversary. On several occasions in July, soldiers prevented Aung San Suu Kyi and colleagues from travelling outside the capital, Yangon, to meet with other NLD members. These restrictions on her freedom of movement culminated in an outrageous roadside standoff in late July, which the SPDC chose to resolve by force rather than dialogue despite widespread condemnation by the international community.

Political prisoners are held in life-threatening conditions in Insein Prison, Yangon, where several have died from ill-treatment and lack of medical attention. Besides torture and beatings, some detainees, including a 68-year-old man, were forced to spend several weeks in a dog kennel as a punishment. Students at the forefront of the 1988 demonstrations have also paid a heavy price and many arrested after demonstrations in 1996 are still in prison.

As well as opposition figures, members of ethnic minorities in Myanmar have borne the brunt of the government's attempts to counter internal armed conflict. Over the last 10 years, the government has forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of villagers from their homes under threat of death.

The army forces entire village populations to leave at short notice, while soldiers seize their cattle and burn down their houses. Starving villagers returning to their old villages to get food have been shot and killed. Amnesty International has received new reports of massacres of villagers similar to those which took place in the Shan state last year.

Hundreds of thousands are still forced to work on infrastructure projects, including road and rail building, airport construction and digging quarries. Working long hours in sometimes dangerous conditions, those who are unable to stand such hard labour face beatings.

Tens of thousands have been forced to work as porters for the army, carrying equipment and weaponry. The sick and elderly who fail to keep up the pace are shot or beaten to death. There are also reports of porters being forced to walk through minefields to clear the path for soldiers.

The government's treatment of ethnic minorities is having disastrous repercussions for neighbouring countries, according to Amnesty International. At least 80,000 Shan and 100,000 Karen are in refugee camps along the Thai border. Thousands of Chin refugees are now in Western India, and at least 20,000 Rohingyas in Bangladesh.

Prisoner of conscience cases

The following are among the ten prisoners of conscience being highlighted by Amnesty International to mark the anniversary:

- C **U Ohn Myint**, 81, was arrested on 28 February 1998, and for several weeks no-one knew where he was. In May he received a seven-year prison sentence for helping to produce a history of the student's movement. He was previously jailed between 1989 and 1993.

- C **U Win Tin, 68**, has been imprisoned since July 1989 and is not due for release until 2008. He suffers from heart disease. His sentence was increased in March 1996 for allegedly attempting to smuggle a letter out of Insein Prison to the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar and which described the poor prison conditions.

- C **Daw San San**, 68, is in prison serving a 25-year sentence. Chosen as an NLD parliamentarian, she was arrested for discussing with other NLD members what to do if the military continued to refuse to cede power. She was released under an amnesty in 1992, but rearrested last year for trying to organize a party meeting.

Other prisoners of conscience include two women, 53-year old writer Daw San San Nwe and philosophy student Moe Kalayar Oo; Dr Zaw Min, a 38-year old medical doctor; senior NLD official U Win Htein; and Maung San Hlaing, a bodyguard of Daw Aung san Suu Kyi.

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