

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 16/015/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 268
16 October 2006

Ko Thet Win Aung, prisoner of conscience, dies in prison

Amnesty International is deeply concerned by the death in Mandalay Prison today of student leader and prisoner of conscience Thet Win Aung, aged 34. The organization calls on authorities to initiate a prompt, independent investigation into the causes of Ko Thet Win Aung's death and to make the findings public. The organization also urges the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to take urgent steps to protect all prisoners' health.

Ko Thet Win Aung had been imprisoned since 1998 for his part in organizing peaceful small scale student demonstrations which called for improvements to the educational system in Myanmar and for the release of political prisoners.

He had been badly tortured during his imprisonment, and had also suffered from a variety of health problems, including malaria. Ko Thet Win Aung had protested the lack of adequate medical treatment and poor diet in prison by going on hunger strike in 2002. By 2005 he was reported to have been unable to walk unassisted.

Amnesty International fears for the health of prisoners in Myanmar, and particularly for those debilitated by years' of imprisonment and ill-treatment, forced to work in poor conditions in labour camps or act as military porters. Prison deaths, including those of political prisoners, are increasing. Poor prison conditions have further deteriorated during 2006.

Amnesty International accordingly urges the SPDC to ensure that the authorities take all necessary steps to ensure that the basic rights of prisoners are upheld and their health is not jeopardized further. As a matter of urgency prisoners should have access to an adequate diet and health care. Access to specialist medical treatment should not be denied. Torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment must be stopped – both in custody and in prison.

Amnesty International expressed further concern that many prisoners of conscience are continuing to be denied their freedom, as Thet Win Aung was, solely on the basis of their peaceful exercise of basic rights. Many are in poor states of health, including both the young and aged, whose physical and mental health has been worsened by torture and ill-treatment. The organization renews calls on the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them.

Background

Scores of political prisoners have died in Myanmar since 1988.

Ko Thet Win Aung was arrested on 4 October 1998 and sentenced to 52 years' imprisonment. This was subsequently increased to 59 years..

Ko Thet Win Aung took part in 1988 demonstrations against 26 years of military rule, when he was a schoolboy studying in Yangon, Myanmar's capital city. He was one of the leading members of the local high school students' union, and in 1989 became a vice-general secretary of the Basic Education Student Union (BESU). He was dismissed from school in 1991 for his political activities and in September of that year was detained for nine months during which time he was reportedly tortured. Subsequently he became a leading member of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU).

Ko Thet Win Aung was arrested with others including students Aye Aung and Myo Min Zaw, who are both still imprisoned and in a poor state of health, for his part in organizing small scale student demonstrations. After being held incommunicado he was sentenced in a 10 day closed trial inside Insein Prison, the main prison where political prisoners are held in Myanmar. He and other students are believed not to have had access to lawyers, and when they asked prison officials and the presiding judge for one, he is reported to have made no response. They were denied the right to speak in their own defence. The authorities stated at the time of his arrest that Thet Win Aung and others arrested with him had been involved in attempts to incite unrest to support plans by the National League for Democracy (NLD), Myanmar's main opposition party, to convene parliament.

Ko Thet Win Aung and others was given the maximum sentences possible under security legislation and laws on publication, which, for example, requires that leaflets be approved by the official censor. As is the case in other convictions of political prisoners, his sentence was applied cumulatively, rather than being served concurrently. He was held for the most part in prisons distant from his family, often several days journey. The practise of sending prisoners to distant prisons commonly jeopardizes prisoners' health by denying them access to essential food and medicine provided by family visits. It is believed that in Mandalay Prison, where he died, the authorities have in 2006 restricted prisoners' access to food and medicine.

Ko Thet Win Aung's brother, Ko Pyone Cho, has been held incommunicado without charge since 29 September 2006, when the authorities detained him and other prominent student leaders. The authorities have stated that the group are being held in preventive detention. Many of the group had previously been imprisoned for their political activities for up to 15 years, they are in debilitated states of health and require medical treatment.

No independent body is currently monitoring detention conditions in Myanmar. Prison visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) which was providing half the essential medicines and hygiene needs of the 90 prison and labour camps that it visited, were suspended after the authorities withdrew permission for it to visit prisons during 2006. The ICRC had also worked with the Myanmar authorities in improving detainees' access to medical care.

For further information please see: *Myanmar 1998 Crackdown on Students -- Imprisoned for up to 59 years* (AI Index: ASA 16/008/2005) <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa160082005>