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Myanmar: Release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is warmly welcomed

Amnesty International warmly welcomes the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the main political party in Myanmar, the National League for Democracy (NLD). She had been held under de facto house arrest by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, the military government) since September 2000.

"Her release is a very positive development in the human rights situation in Myanmar, and we hope that it will soon be followed by the release of the hundreds of other prisoners held for their peaceful political views," Amnesty International said today.

"The international community must continue to encourage the Myanmar government to make further improvements in the human rights and humanitarian situation there. At the same time the Burmese people need to have the opportunity to decide their own future. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed, and most Burmese are suffering from the effects of a poor economy."

To date the organization has recorded some 280 releases of political prisoners since December 2000. During the last 18 months few political arrests have been reported. Nevertheless there are about 1500 political prisoners who remain behind bars in Myanmar, a number of whom have not been released at the end of their sentences.

As recently as November 2001 Dr. Salai Tun Than, an ethnic Chin professor in his early 70s, was arrested in Yangon, the capital, for peacefully calling for democratic change. In March 2002 he was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment under the vaguely-worded provisions of the Emergency Provisions Law. Amnesty International considers him to be a prisoner of conscience and calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

Another prisoner of conscience is Paw U Tun, alias Min Ko Naing, who was arrested in March 1989 and has been imprisoned ever since. As a student leader during the mass pro-democracy movement in 1988, he led thousands of students, hundreds of whom are also still imprisoned, in protest at 26 years of military rule. He is currently imprisoned in Sittwe Prison, Rakhine State, amid ongoing concerns about his health.

Background

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the SPDC have been engaged in talks since October 2000.

These discussions are confidential, but are thought to remain at the confidence-building stage. It is widely believed that until her release and the release of hundreds of other political prisoners, the talks would not progress beyond that stage.

During this period the SPDC has permitted several international delegations to visit, including Ambassador Razali Ismael, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Myanmar; Professor Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar; and the International Labour Organization (ILO) High Level Team. Amnesty International welcomes all these developments, which it hopes will lead to further improvements in the human rights situation in Myanmar.

However the military continue to use civilians for forced labour, in spite of two decrees issued by the SPDC outlawing the practice. Amnesty International has recent evidence that the military is still seizing ethnic minority civilians for unpaid forced labour in counter-insurgency areas of the Shan, Mon, and Karen States, and the Tenasserim Division. The ILO and the SPDC have recently agreed on an ILO liaison presence in Myanmar by June 2002, which should assist in beginning to eradicate forced labour.

Public Document

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