

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 16/005/2003 (Public)
News Service No: 29
10 February 2003

Myanmar: Amnesty International's first visit to Myanmar Official statement

Published

Demelza Stubbings:

I would like to welcome you all to this Amnesty International press conference following the organization's first ever visit to Myanmar, which took place between 30 January and 8 February 2003. Amnesty International is a world wide human rights movement of more than 1.7 million members. It neither supports nor opposes any government, opposition group, political philosophy or religious creed. It works to promote and protect human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international covenants and standards.

The delegates for this mission were: myself - Demelza Stubbings, Program Director for the Asia Pacific Region; and Donna Guest, Researcher on Myanmar and Thailand.

As you know, it is Amnesty International's policy to seek visits to all countries around the world, in order to investigate the human rights situation and to hold talks with the authorities and other actors with the aim of protecting and promoting human rights. As such we have been requesting access to Myanmar since 1988 when we significantly increased our research and campaigning efforts on the country.

We welcome the positive response to Amnesty International's most recent request for access which was submitted to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) in July 2002. The dates for the visit were those requested by Amnesty International.

Visas were issued in London shortly before our visit and were valid for 10 weeks. There were no specific conditions attached to the visas granted to the organization. In keeping with our normal practice, Amnesty International informed the SPDC well before visas were issued of our working methods and the type of activities which we would expect to undertake on our first visit. No objections were raised by the SPDC. The program of activities and meetings was set by Amnesty International. We asked the government to arrange meetings with their own officials and the delegation arranged all other meetings itself. Responsibility for organizing the visit from the government side lay with the Ministry of Defence.

Amnesty International meets all its own expenses. Our funding comes from our membership and we do not seek or accept any donations from governments or political organizations.

The delegation was assisted on its visit by an independent interpreter approached by the organization, who has no links to the SPDC or to any other political groups.

During the visit, the Amnesty International delegation met with government ministers and other officials, including senior officials in the prison and police services, with whom it held frank discussions. The delegation also met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, in her capacity as General Secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and with members and supporters of the NLD. The delegates talked to representatives of various international organizations and the diplomatic and business communities.

The delegation visited detention facilities, including Insein Correctional Facility in Yangon and the Guard Ward at the Yangon General Hospital. We conducted private and confidential, individual interviews with seven prisoners, each of them lasting up to two hours. We also met with several recently released political prisoners and with the families of those who are still imprisoned.

Before meeting with any local people Amnesty International sought and received guarantees from the SPDC that there would be no adverse consequences for anyone with whom the delegation spoke and worked, including those prisoners it interviewed privately.

The security and well being of the people Amnesty International interviews anywhere in the world is our first priority. The organization works openly and transparently in good faith and expects the same from others.

Amnesty International views this initial visit as the start of a process, which should result in the organization's return to the country for research purposes. One of our objectives was to meet with as many people in Yangon as possible to lay the groundwork for travel to other parts of the country later in 2003.

The meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi took place at her residence on Friday 31 January 2003. We discussed various issues of mutual concern during a cordial two-hour-meeting, the content of which is confidential, as agreed with her.

In our meetings with the representatives of the SPDC we discussed many issues including:

the continued imprisonment of between 1200 - 1300 political prisoners throughout the country, many of whom Amnesty International believes to be prisoners of conscience, that is, people imprisoned solely for their peaceful political or religious beliefs -- who have not used or advocated for the use of violence;

the immediate release on humanitarian grounds of 19 prisoners -- we submitted several detailed prisoner lists to the SPDC during our visit, with recommendations for release and we are expecting an early progress report on these cases;

during all of its meetings Amnesty International made clear to the SPDC that its public reporting function is integral to its working methods and will continue.

A key focus of the visit was to learn more about the administration of justice. Amnesty International's concerns in Myanmar are wide-ranging, and its discussions included many different issues. However, the administration of justice is fundamental to the protection of human rights, and without good laws, appropriate policing, fair trials, and humane conditions of detention, violations can and will continue, violators will remain unpunished and victims will have no chance of gaining redress.

The visit confirmed what Amnesty International believed to be the case, namely that policing, trial procedures and conditions of detention fall short of international law and standards and that many of the laws and directives -- which have the status of law -- criminalize the exercise of certain fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, association and assembly.

During the meetings with the SPDC officials, Amnesty International also raised cases of recently arrested political prisoners and appealed for the immediate release on humanitarian grounds of one such prisoner held in Insein Correctional Facility in Yangon with her 18 month old child.

Amnesty International recognizes and welcomes the widespread and legitimate international interest in its visit to Myanmar. It is also aware that many people have very high expectations of the speed with which our organization could achieve results.

The delegation offered concrete achievable recommendations to the SPDC which it could implement immediately to improve the situation and alleviate suffering. These include:

immediate and unconditional release on humanitarian grounds of the 19 prisoners, as mentioned above;

access for political prisoners to reading and writing materials and an end to the practice of holding such prisoners in isolation.

We expect to receive an early indication of progress from the authorities in response to our good faith recommendations.

The organization also seeks medium and long term changes including legal reform and improvements in the administration of justice at all levels. These changes would take time to implement anywhere in the world. Our detailed recommendations on these issues will be sent to the SPDC within three months and will later be published.

Since 1999, the authorities in Myanmar have made significant improvements in conditions of detention in many facilities throughout the country. Amnesty International has publicly welcomed such improvements, but believes that much remains to be done. We will continue our work to expose human rights violations as they occur, and to recommend the necessary changes to prevent such violations in future and to end impunity for those committing them.

We look forward to a continuing dialogue with all those concerned with the promotion and protection of human rights in Myanmar.

The above statement was presented during the press conference on 10 February 2003 in Bangkok by Demelza Stubbings -- head of the delegation to Myanmar.

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