

EXTERNAL

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IMPRISONED DOCTORS/OPPOSITION FIGURES

Dr Ma Thida, Dr Aung Khin Sint and Than Min
MYANMAR (formerly Burma)

On 15 October 1993 Dr Ma Thida, Dr Aung Khin Sint and Than Min were sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment in two separate trials. Dr Ma Thida was arrested with ten others, including at least one MP-elect, and held incommunicado before being brought to trial on 27 September on charges of endangering public tranquility, having contact with unlawful associations and distributing unlawful literature. On the same day, Dr Aung Khin Sint, who is an opposition politician, was also sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment together with his assistant Than Min after they were charged by the ruling military authorities with distributing "threatening literature".

All three, who are adopted by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience, were tried under legislation which the authorities have used to criminalize non-violent political opposition activities since the military regained control of the country in a *coup d'état* after months of nationwide pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988.

Dr Ma Thida

Ma Thida who is aged 27, is a hospital doctor by profession and a well-known writer. She is prominent among the country's political opposition and had earlier been the campaign assistant to Aung San Suu Kyi, one of the founders of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Myanmar's main opposition party. (Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1991, was arrested in July 1989 while Secretary General of the NLD and has since been under house arrest.)

Dr Ma Thida is one of the most prominent figures among the group of 11 arrested in mid-1993 August and the Myanmar authorities are reported to have had to postpone an earlier attempt to bring her to trial after crowds gathered at the court room. She is a well-known writer, best known for her short stories, but has also written several novels, none of which have been published. Although she was given official permission to publish her latest novel, this has now been banned. Ma Thida was working at the Muslim Free Hospital in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) at the time of her arrest. She is reported to have had some gastric problems since her detention, but may now begin to receive a better diet following her sentencing.

Amnesty International believes that Ma Thida was arrested and imprisoned solely for her activities within the NLD, a party which was established during the 1988 pro-democracy movement

and which enjoys wide public support. At the time of the pro-democracy movement Ma Thida was one of a number of doctors who treated students and others injured in the demonstrations.

Dr Aung Khin Sint and Than Min

Dr Aung Khin Sint, aged 58, is an NLD MP-elect and was a member of the National Convention established by the military authorities in April 1992 to discuss the drafting of a constitution (see background information below). He was arrested together with his assistant Than Min on 3 August 1993 for having written and distributed letters and leaflets to other members of the National Convention. The authorities stated that Dr Aung Khin Sint "has abused his privilege of attending the National Convention as a delegate, has sent threatening and anonymous letters to National Convention delegates and to his own party members and is secretly and unscrupulously engaged in political agitation".

Although the government has not publicly revealed the contents of Dr Aung Khin Sint's letter, Amnesty International has no evidence that it contained anything "threatening". It believes that it was simply an open letter to fellow members of the Convention and the NLD expressing his views on the progress of Convention discussions.

According to some sources, Dr Aung Khin Sint was attempting to encourage NLD members to oppose the military authorities' continuing hold on power and to continue to call for democracy.

Dr Aung Khin Sint graduated in medicine from Rangoon University and later studied in the UK, obtaining degrees in community medicine and industrial health in Manchester, and was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Health. He was the team leader of the Tuberculosis Investigation team in Dakhina and Director of its Medical Department until 1988. At the time of the pro-democracy movement, Dr Aung Khin Sint was Secretary of the Burma Medical Association and Chairman of the Union of Health Servants and signed a protest letter in the name of the Burma Medical Association after the army entered the compound of Rangoon General Hospital on 10 August 1988 and opened fire on a crowd killing six people. Rangoon General Hospital was being used to treat those injured during the demonstrations. When the NLD was founded Dr Aung Khin Sint became a member and contested the general elections in May 1990, winning his seat with 85% of votes. He was previously arrested in October 1990, together with several other members of parliament-elect, and released after a number of weeks.

Background: The pro-democracy movement of 1988 and events to date

Widespread civil unrest emerged in Myanmar, then Burma¹, in March 1988 with mass demonstrations calling for an end to 26 years of one-party military rule. The demonstrations continued over a period of several months until, on 18 September 1988, the pro-democracy uprising was violently suppressed by the army which reasserted military control and formed a new ruling body known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

Although the SLORC subsequently allowed political parties to register and promised elections, it began to arrest thousands of opposition party members, culminating in a series of mass arrests in mid-1989. The promised elections took place in May 1990 and the NLD gained over 80% of parliamentary seats, although many of its leaders were imprisoned at the time. However, the SLORC has ignored the results of the election and continues to retain power itself. It has ruled by decree, issuing martial law orders to impose restrictions on the rights to freedom of

¹The name of the country was changed to Myanmar in June 1989 when the English spelling of the names of several cities and regions were also changed.

expression and assembly. These devices have been used to arbitrarily detain those perceived as a political threat.

Following much international criticism of Myanmar's human rights record, the SLORC declared in April 1992 that all political prisoners not deemed a threat to national security would be released. This was the first acknowledgment that political prisoners were being held. Between the time of the announcement and the end of October 1993 some 2000 political prisoners are reported to have been released. However, hundreds of others remain in detention, among them 25 members of parliament-elect.

The SLORC have declared that they will hand over power only when a strong constitution is in place. However, a mechanism for drafting a constitution was not established until April 1992 when the SLORC announced that a National Convention would be convened "to lay down principles for the drafting of a constitution". The Convention was first opened in January 1993, but has been adjourned on a number of occasions and has now again been adjourned until January 1994.

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Aung Khin Sint, Than Min, Ma Thida and others arrested with her are among dozens of opposition figures to have been arrested over the last few months in an apparent attempt to stem criticism of the manner in which the National Convention is proceeding. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release.

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To: Medical professionals
From: Medical Office / Research Department - Asia
Date: 24 November 1993

MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION

**Dr Ma Thida, Dr Aung Khin Sint and Than Min
MYANMAR**

Keywords

Theme: POCs

Profession/association: Doctors

Summary

Ma Thida is a 27-year-old doctor and writer who was arrested in August 1993 and sentenced in October to 20 years' imprisonment. She is a well-known opposition activist. On the same day, but in a separate trial, Dr Aung Khin Sint, a doctor and opposition politician, was also sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment together with his assistant. All were arrested for peaceful activities connected to their membership of the opposition party, the National League for Democracy, and have been adopted as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. Please see the details attached.

Recommended Actions

1) Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses given below:

- expressing concern at the sentences of 20 years' imprisonment which were passed against Dr Ma Thida, Dr Aung Khin Sint and Than Min
- noting that none of the three had used or advocated violence and were arrested solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression
- seeking information on their well-being and state of health and urging their immediate and unconditional release from prison

2) Please approach your national Medical Association with a request that they take similar action on behalf of the three.

Addresses

General Than Shwe
Chairman
State Law & Order Restoration Council
Yangon
Union of Myanmar

Lieutenant General Tin U
Secretary 2
State Law & Order Restoration Council
Yangon
Union of Myanmar

Lieutenant General Aye Thaung
Member
State Law & Order Restoration Council
Yangon
Union of Myanmar

Lieutenant General Rhin Nyunt
Secretary 1
State Law & Order Restoration Council
Yangon
Union of Myanmar

Copies to

Vice Admiral Than Nyunt
Minister of Health
Ministers' Office
Yangon
Union of Myanmar

Dr Ma Thida

