

AI Index: ASA 16/012/2001

MYANMAR

Time for change

Violence and repression have characterized the past decade in Myanmar.

AI says it is time for change.

Thirteen years ago, millions of demonstrators took to the streets calling for an end to decades of military rule. They wanted greater freedom, democracy and human rights. Instead, their peaceful protest – during which thousands of people were killed by the army and police – sparked a new era of increased repression and human rights violations. Such abuses carry on to this day.

Freedom of expression and association is now non-existent. The media is completely state-controlled and censorship rigidly imposed. Opposition groups are severely restricted and independent non-governmental organizations are banned. Almost 2,000 political prisoners are being forced to live in harsh and inhumane conditions. Some have been incarcerated since 1989, some of them are elderly and in poor health. One of those is 70-year-old journalist U Win Tin who has been a prisoner of conscience since July 1989. At one point, he was forced to spend several months in a dog kennel, sleeping on a cold concrete floor without bedding, adequate food or medical care.

Ethnic minorities in conflict areas are particularly singled out for harsh treatment by the military. They are forced to leave their homes and livelihoods to work without pay on government-run infrastructure projects. As a result they cannot afford to feed their families or provide education and health care for their children. Some are ordered to become porters for the military, carrying heavy loads for days and weeks on end. They are beaten if they fail to keep up and many have died as a result. Over the years, hundreds of thousands of villagers have been forcibly relocated into areas controlled by the military. As a result of such persistent abuse, thousands have fled to the safety of neighbouring countries and now live displaced lives as refugees. There are 110,000 Karen refugees in Thailand alone.

Although the human rights situation in Myanmar paints a bleak picture, there are a few positive signs. The International Committee for the Red Cross has been given access to prisons and labour camps. In January this year around 85 political prisoners were released, and in March a further 30. The reported dialogue between the ruling State Peace and Development Council and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the main opposition party National League for Democracy (which won the May 1990 elections but was not allowed to take power), provides some hope for change.

We want to see much more than this. From April, Amnesty International is exerting renewed pressure on the military in Myanmar to end its appalling human rights record. We will urge the authorities to release prisoners of conscience immediately and without condition. We will ask them to allow for freedom of expression, improve prison conditions, end forced labour, torture and ill-treatment and extrajudicial executions.

Caption

Photo: A woman from the Ghurka minority in Myanmar © Chris Robinson

Despite 13 years of repression the people of Myanmar are still calling for more freedom and protection of their human rights.

They need and deserve our support.

Please write to the Myanmar authorities, urging them to:

- Release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience, particularly those who are sick and elderly
- Guarantee the rights to freedom of expression and association
- End torture and ill-treatment at the hands of security personnel
- Improve conditions of imprisonment so they conform to international standards
- Abolish in law and practice the use of forced labour
- Respect the rights of ethnic minorities and end human rights violations against them
- Ratify without reservation the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention against Torture and the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination

Send your appeals to:

Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt,
 Secretary 1, State Peace and Development Council
 c/o Ministry of Defence,
 Signal Pagoda Road, Yangon,
 Union of Myanmar

Caption: An escaped military porter © Hugh Wood

“See by making jokes like that ... which don’t affect anyone else, I was put in jail for one year and eight months. So I asked why I was arrested, it was probably because I joked that the Khamauk hat, the symbol of the NLD was good ... So I asked why I was arrested, which law did I violate? They said it was the “we don’t like you law”.”

Comedian U Pa Pa Lay made these comments at a concert in the home of NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. He is now serving a seven year prison sentence.

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“I was conscripted on a regular basis by the military camp. [In January 2001] after three days of forced labour they handed me over to a military column ... mostly I had to carry food and backpacks. At night our hands were tied behind us, our feet locked in bamboo rod. There were three of us, but the other two were killed. I was never paid, or even given food. I was also beaten on many occasions but this last time was the worst. They hit me with rifle butts, mostly on my head and maybe 10 to 20 times. Sometimes I lost consciousness – when I came to they started beating me again.”

A 30-year-old farmer speaking in February this year. He fled to Thailand after being forced to work as a porter by the military in the Shan State.

(Not the man pictured, who is alleged to be in forced labour in Myanmar)

© Chris Robinson

“Sometimes they deprived me of even water for two or three days, which made me very weak, unable to speak. That was what they wanted in the first place ... After kneeling four or five days, I had to throw myself down onto the floor, with handcuffs at my back and a cloth hood on my head. I couldn’t see anyone. But I could hear voices ... threats ... that I would be damaged beyond repair ... that I would be

physically damaged beyond repair. I had to go through with this for 27 days.”

U Win Htein describes his

interrogation by the military in 1989. A senior assistant to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, he was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment in 1996 for allegedly supplying information on the country’s agriculture and prison conditions.

© Leslie Kean/Burma Project USA

“I believe that it is not the duty of a writer to take part personally in political battles; it is my conviction that a writer discharges his or her duty simply by observing and putting on record the rights and wrongs, the justices and injustices that result from these battles.”

Daw San San Nwe, a journalist and widowed with seven children, is currently serving a 10 year prison sentence for allegedly passing information to foreign journalists and diplomats. She has been ill during her time in detention. © AI

“He was taken out of the village and beaten severely so he became unconscious. The troops beheaded him and left the dead body on the spot. The people did not dare collect the dead body but could only look. The troops put mines around the body. They [the villagers] could not retrieve it. I left the next day. I thought I might face the same fate myself ...”

A Karen refugee in Thailand describes the extrajudicial execution of her brother, for allegedly passing information to an armed opposition group.

(Not the Karen refugee pictured)

© Ben Bohane

“Win Tin said he did what he believed was right ... He told the court that the loss of human rights and torture in prison were all genuine and that the prosecution could not prove that these points were inaccurate ... it is clearly evident that (others) and Win Tin had written and published magazines, news bulletins and papers that were all against the government ... The accused prisoner(s) committed a crime while serving out prison terms ... there is no justification in showing them mercy ...”

Excerpt from an unofficial translation of the report on the trial of journalist and NLD member U Win Tin and 21 others for allegedly telling the UN about torture, ill-treatment and poor prison conditions and for writing poems in prison. U Win Tin is not due for release until 2008.

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