

EXTERNAL

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EXTRA 73/96

Fear of torture / Legal concern

21 May 1996

MYANMAR Dozens of pro-democracy activists arrested

Over 45 pro-democracy activists have been arrested in the last two days from their homes throughout Myanmar. Amnesty International fears that they may be facing torture and ill-treatment in custody and may have been arrested solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association. Reports indicate that arrests are likely to continue over the next few days.

According to reports, those arrested are members of parliament-elect who won seats in the 1990 general election. However it seems that the wives of two MPs were arrested in their stead, as the MPs were not at home at the time. Some of the MPs are reported to be held under house arrest and some have been taken in for interrogation.

Tension in Myanmar has mounted recently between the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, Myanmar's military authorities) and the National League for Democracy (NLD, the political party founded by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi which won the 1990 elections). Attacks against the NLD in the government-controlled press have increased markedly. The NLD had planned a meeting of elected representatives at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's home to mark the sixth anniversary of the its victory in the elections. The meeting was to take place from 26-29 May. The arrests have been widely seen as a pre-emptive attempt by the SLORC to prevent the meeting from occurring.

Torture and ill-treatment is common in Myanmar both during initial interrogation and after sentencing. In addition, conditions in the country's prisons fall far short of international minimum standards, with lack of access to proper medical treatment, overcrowding, and insufficient food all commonplace.

This latest series of arrests is the largest in a SLORC crackdown on NLD members and supporters. Since November 1995, when the NLD withdrew from the SLORC-controlled National Convention, there has been increasing harassment of the party by the SLORC, including arrests of dozens of party members. Many people have been detained for possessing videotapes of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's weekend speeches, others for writing a poem commemorating the death in custody of an NLD colleague, still others for satirizing the military in an NLD performance (see UA 04/96, ASA 16/03/96, 10 January 1996 and updates and UA 23/96, ASA 16/06/96, 1 February and updates). Amnesty International is gravely concerned at the growing pattern of arrests aimed at silencing NLD activity.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The SLORC took power following the violent suppression of widespread pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988. Hundreds of people were killed during the military crackdown, with hundreds more arrested and imprisoned in 1989. General elections held in 1990 resulted in an overwhelming victory for the NLD. However the SLORC refused to hand over power and has continued to rule by decree since 1988. Freedom of expression, association and assembly are severely restricted in Myanmar, and anyone expressing opposition to the SLORC is at risk of arrest. Although over 2000 political prisoners have reportedly been released since April 1992, hundreds remain in prison.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/telexes/airmail letters in English or your own language:

- seeking assurances that the treatment of the NLD MPs elect conforms to international standards and that they are being given proper access to family, lawyers of their own choice and medical personnel;
- seeking information about the whereabouts of the all those detained and the exact charges against them;
- urging that if they have been arrested solely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association, they be immediately and unconditionally released.

APPEALS TO:

1. Senior General Than Shwe, Chairman
State Law and Order Restoration Council
c/o Director of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI)
Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road
Dagon Post Office
Yangon, Union of Myanmar

Telegrams: General Than Shwe, Yangon, Myanmar

Telexes: 21316

Salutation: Dear General

2. Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, Secretary 1
State Law and Order Restoration Council
c/o Director of Defence Services Intelligence (DDSI)
Ministry of Defence, Signal Pagoda Road
Dagon Post Office
Yangon, Union of Myanmar

Telegrams: Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt, Yangon, Myanmar

Salutation: Dear General

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of Myanmar accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 21 June 1996.