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Myanmar: Asian activists collect thousands of signatures for human rights

This week Amnesty International activists across the Asia-Pacific region are sending thousands of signatures to the Myanmar government calling for the release of prisoners of conscience and human rights reforms.

In a huge demonstration of regional solidarity, ordinary people from India, to Malaysia, to South Korea have signed petitions which will be delivered to diplomatic representatives in the region, marking the high point of a four-month campaign on human rights in Myanmar.

"The recent release of some prominent political prisoners is a step in the right direction, but at least 1800 political prisoners are still held, often in appalling conditions. The petitions show the extent of regional concern about these and other violations."

Since April this year Amnesty International has stepped up its worldwide campaign for the release of prisoners of conscience, as well as an end to torture and forced labour in Myanmar. Activists have collected signatures, sent appeals, and organized events with other organizations and trade unions in an effort to improve human rights. Recent prisoner releases show that international pressure works, but much more is needed to help other victims and secure lasting reforms.

At least 41 political prisoners have recently been released, including 38 members of parliament elected in the May 1990 elections. Among those released is 83-year-old Dr Saw Mra Aung, leader of the Arakan League for Democracy and a leading member of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament formed in 1998 after the refusal of the ruling State Peace and Development Council to convene a

parliament. The vast majority of them had been detained in government "guest houses" since 1998 without charge or trial.

But hundreds of other prisoners of conscience and political prisoners are still held, including politicians, students, doctors, farmers, teachers, journalists, writers, lawyers, comedians and housewives serving long prison terms in very poor conditions. U Win Tin, a 71-year-old journalist and founding member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), is just one of the many others who have not benefited from the recent releases. Detained since July 1989, he is serving a 20-year sentence for his peaceful political activities and is in very poor health.

Torture and ill-treatment continue unabated and ethnic minorities are still subjected to a range of violations, including forced labour.

"The momentum for change must not be lost. The government of Myanmar should release more prisoners of conscience and take further steps to improve the human rights situation for all the people of Myanmar."

Background

Prison conditions in Myanmar are very harsh; prisoners are often shackled and put in solitary confinement for long periods of time, and do not receive proper medical care. Torture has become institutionalized. Members of ethnic minorities are still being forced to work on infrastructure projects and carry heavy loads for the military, where they are subjected to extrajudicial executions, torture and ill-treatment. Hundreds of thousands of villagers in several states have been forcibly relocated in the context of counter-insurgency activities.

Since the beginning of 2001 around 140 political prisoners have been released, including 41 in recent weeks. Most of those freed are

NLD members - including members of parliament-elect - detained without charge or trial, some since July 1998. These releases have occurred in the context of confidential meetings which have been taking place since October 2000 between NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and visits to the country by Ambassador Razali Ismail, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Myanmar and Professor Paulo Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Myanmar. Three NLD leaders remain under de facto house arrest - Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo and Aung Shwe.

Amnesty International's campaign on Myanmar is part of a worldwide action in 2001. Action in the Asia-Pacific region has included activities in Australia, India, Japan, Nepal, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand.

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