

AI INDEX: ASA 16/31/96

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE 0001 HRS GMT, 10 JULY 1996

MYANMAR: ONE YEAR AFTER AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S RELEASE -- REPRESSION INCREASES

On the first anniversary of the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on 10 July 1995, Amnesty International today condemned the Myanmar government for dramatically heightening repression in recent months, and its lack of progress towards improving human rights over the past year.

“The release of Daw Aung Sang Suu Kyi raised real hopes of an improvement in Myanmar,” Amnesty International said. “Unfortunately, the events over the past year have dashed any optimism that the government intended anything other than a cosmetic exercise to gain some international favour.”

“In reality, the recent arrests of hundreds of members of the National League for Democracy indicate that the government is willing to take any measures it sees fit to intimidate and threaten an opposition party which won more than 80% of the seats in the 1990 general election.”

At least 1,000 political prisoners remain behind bars, forced labour and portering continues throughout the country, torture and ill-treatment is commonplace, and the government is continuing its campaign of fear and intimidation against opposition supporters, the human rights organization said.

When Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was released, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) stated that she was released unconditionally. However, since then she and other National League for Democracy (NLD) members have been subject to restriction of movement and intense surveillance.

In June 1996, SLORC threatened to ban the NLD completely, and then arrest its members for belonging to an “illegal association”. This threat was backed up by the sinister statement that those arrested would be detained in Insein Prison -- where Amnesty International has documented dozens of cases of torture, ill-treatment and deaths. On 7 June SLORC issued law 5/96 -- under which anyone who expresses their political views publicly can receive a 20-year prison sentence.

“This draconian measure effectively outlaws free speech in Myanmar and it should be repealed immediately,” Amnesty International said. “However, it is just the latest threat in an increasing pattern of intimidation since Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s release.”

- In January 1996, U Pa Pa Lay and U Lu Zaw, two members of a comedy troupe, were given seven year jail sentences after an independence day performance which included dances, songs and jokes satirizing the authorities. Their trial was conducted inside Mandalay prison and they were denied any legal representation. Both were sent to labour camps and forced to work long hours breaking rocks whilst shackled with iron bars across their legs.

- In March 1996, Sein Hla Aung and Zaw Zaw Myaing were sentenced to three and two years in prison respectively for distributing videotapes of Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches -- Amnesty International considers both to be prisoners of conscience. At about the same time local officials reportedly began arresting people for watching the videos in private homes.
- Later the same month, NLD member U Saw Hlaing was arrested on 15 March after the car he was driving hit a trishaw in Bago Division, hurting two of its occupants. Neither his family nor lawyers were allowed to provide him with legal assistance or accompany him to court, where he was subsequently sentenced to five years' imprisonment for "grievous bodily harm". According to the NLD, the police forced the three people in the trishaw to remain in hospital for 22 days, even though one of them had only dislocated a thumb and the other one had received two stitches on the chin. Under Myanmar law in order for an injury to be considered "grievous bodily harm" the individual concerned must have remained in the hospital for at least 21 days.
- In May 1996, the authorities arrested more than 300 NLD members following an announcement by the party that it would hold a weekend meeting to commemorate the sixth anniversary of their election victory. Despite the release of most of the detainees, Amnesty International is concerned that about 31 are still in prison. Among those arrested were Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's bodyguard -- Maung San Hlaing.

While incarcerated, political prisoners suffer conditions which fall far short of international minimum standards, with lack of access to proper medical treatment, overcrowding, and insufficient food all commonplace. Political prisoners are subjected to ill-treatment both during interrogation and after sentencing, Amnesty International said.

In November 1995 prison authorities at Insein Prison began to subject a group of 29 political prisoners to severe and prolonged ill-treatment as a punishment for attempting to send a letter about prison conditions to the UN. They were placed in tiny cells meant to house military dogs, forced to sleep on cold concrete floors with no bedding and forbidden any family visits. Following a report by the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar about the human rights situation, which included details about the group in Insein prison, 21 of the prisoners were given additional prison terms.

Amnesty International is calling on the SLORC to release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally, ensure that political prisoners receive prompt and fair trials, and guarantee that political prisoners are not subjected to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The organization is also calling on governments attending the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting in Indonesia in July to raise these human rights concerns with the SLORC, who will be present at the meeting.

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