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## **Myanmar: Political prisoner release 'major step' but gates must open 'even wider'**

The release of at least 130 political prisoners in Myanmar today—including well-known dissidents Htay Kywe, U Khun Htun Oo, Min Ko Naing, and U Gambira—is a significant move, Amnesty International said today.

The prisoner amnesty is the second this year and the fourth under Myanmar's post-elections government, bringing the total number of political prisoners released to at least 477.

But as more than a thousand political prisoners may remain behind bars, many of whom are prisoners of conscience, the amnesty must continue until all are freed according to Amnesty International.

“This release of political prisoners is a major step forward, but the gates must be opened even wider to all remaining prisoners of conscience,” said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar Researcher.

“The authorities must finish the job now, once and for all.”

Amnesty International expressed concern at reports that some prisoners had conditions attached to their release. The organization is calling for those released to be permitted to re-engage in the political process, and exercise fully their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association.

“The political activity that landed these dissidents in prison also contributed to the momentum for change that resulted in their release today,” said Benjamin Zawacki. “The authorities must not revert to repression, but continue to move forward.”

There is debate over how many political prisoners are actually being held in Myanmar, with sizable differences between the government's figures and those put forward by some opposition groups.

Amnesty International has asked the Myanmar authorities to seek assistance from the United Nations in convening a panel, including the National League for Democracy (NLD), to reconcile differences in numbers and definitions.

On 19 November 2011, President Thein Sein was reported as saying that he “doesn't agree with” the characterization of some prisoners as political.

However, his senior political advisor, Ko Ko Hlaing, was reported in October 2011 as saying that there were “about 600” remaining prisoners of conscience in Myanmar—which may correspond to the 651 prisoners the authorities announced would be released today. He also said that differences may “depend on how people define prisoners of conscience and ordinary prisoners”.

“The Myanmar government, at the highest levels, should acknowledge political imprisonment. This is critical for ensuring that no one is subject to an unjust prison term in the future because of a dispute over definitions,” said Benjamin Zawacki.

“The ‘quality’ of this release thus far is high, but ultimately it is the quantity that counts. While we welcome the release of such prominent peaceful activists, we urge the authorities to release all remaining prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally.”

## **Background**

Htay Kywe and U Gambira were leaders of the September 2007 ‘Saffron Revolution’. U Khun Htun Oo is Chair of the Shan National League for Democracy, and Min Ko Naing is a leader of the 88 Generation Student group.

On 16 May 2011, the Myanmar government reduced by one year the sentences of all prisoners in the country, and commuted all death sentences to life imprisonment. This resulted in the release of at least 72 political prisoners who had almost completed their sentences.

On 12 October 2011, the government released 241 political prisoners as part of a general amnesty for 6,359 prisoners. On 2 January 2012, all prison terms were reduced by various amounts depending on their length with the exception of life sentences, and all death sentences were commuted to life imprisonment. At least 34 political prisoners were released.

Amnesty International organized a petition between 17 October and 4 November 2011 calling for the release of all prisoners of conscience in Myanmar. The petition was signed by more than 30,750 people in 77 countries around the world.