

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Myanmar: Amnesty International calls for Actions not Words

Bangkok: 22 December 2003. Following a 17 day visit to Myanmar, an Amnesty International delegation called on the government to release all prisoners of conscience and stop arresting people for their peaceful dissent.

At a press conference in Bangkok the delegation issued a statement outlining a range of serious concerns substantiated during the visit, and called on the Myanmar authorities to take urgent steps to improve the human rights situation, which has deteriorated significantly since the violent 30th May attack on the National League for Democracy (NLD). Amnesty International, which first visited Myanmar in February, has documented the arrest of scores of people for non-violent political activities since May, many of whom are now confirmed to have been sentenced to long terms of imprisonment under repressive legislation.

In August of this year, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) declared that it would reconvene the National Convention in order to draft a constitution. Last week in Bangkok, the Myanmar foreign minister, U Win Aung, reportedly pledged that the transition process would be conducted in an "all-inclusive manner" involving all groups.

"The most concrete demonstration of the government's recent commitment to change would be the immediate release of all prisoners of conscience" the organization said today.

During the visit Amnesty International delegates met with government officials; interviewed 35 political prisoners in prisons in Yangon, Bago and Mwalmyine; and talked to political party leaders from several ethnic nationalities. However they were denied access to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD General Secretary, who is currently held under de facto house arrest.

"These encounters have strongly reinforced our concerns about political imprisonment, including arbitrary arrest; prolonged incommunicado detention; and unfair trials of political detainees", the organization said.

Certain human rights improvements can, with a genuine commitment to reform, move forward with all speed. Other much needed reforms will take time, such as comprehensive overhaul of the justice system.

"The authorities have told us to be patient, and that change may come soon. But these assurances ring hollow in the face of continuing repression. We will judge progress on human rights in Myanmar by concrete improvements on the ground. Fine words, and vague promises for the future without any timetable for change carry little weight." Amnesty International said.

Ultimately there comes a time for action, and that time is now. Once again, and in the strongest possible terms, Amnesty International urges the authorities to:

1. Release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally.

They include members of parliament elect, journalists, doctors, lawyers, teachers and young activists. These men and women have the potential to make an invaluable contribution to the future of the country. Selective releases of a few high profile individuals will not suffice.

2. Stop the use of repressive legislation to criminalize freedom of expression and peaceful association.

These laws date from the nineteenth century to the present. Examples of their use in recent months include sentencing people for staging solitary protests or for discussing social and economic issues in personal letters.

3. End the use of administrative detention provisions to hold prisoners of conscience without trial or prolong the incarceration of political prisoners who have completed their sentences.

Existing provisions (Articles 10a & 10b of the 1975 State Protection Law, amended by law 11/91) allow for up to five years' detention without charge, trial or recourse to appeal in the courts.

4. Address the black hole of incommunicado detention without charge or trial carried out by Military Intelligence Personnel and other members of the security forces.

Continued arbitrary detention and intimidation by the authorities have created an atmosphere of fear and repression that will take more than rhetoric to dispel.

“All of these improvements are essential to underpin the government's professed commitment to an inclusive, transparent reconvening of the National Convention process,” Amnesty International said. Such reforms will also create an enabling environment for independent, impartial investigations into allegations of serious human rights violations, such as the 30 May violence; and continuing forced labour imposed by the military and other violations against civilians in counter-insurgency areas.

Reconciliation and enduring security can best be achieved by protecting rather than curtailing fundamental human rights for all the people of Myanmar.// Ends

For further information or a copy of the full statement please call:

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