

## **Myanmar: Campaigning for an end to official repression**

*Starting from today, members of Amnesty International around the world will step up their campaign for human rights in Myanmar by lobbying governments and investors to push for human rights improvements there. They will also write appeals directly to the government of Myanmar, urging them to release sick or elderly prisoners of conscience, to improve prison conditions, to stop torture and to halt forced labour.*

*"Although the human rights situation in Myanmar remains grave, recent signs that international pressure may be having some effect give us an opportunity to step up the campaign for human rights in the country," Amnesty International said today.*

*Reports of ongoing secret meetings between Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and members of the ruling State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), are a welcome development. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) continues to have access to prisons and labour camps. A year ago the ICRC announced that it had visited over 30,000 inmates in 25 prisons since it gained access in May 1999.*

*There have also been prisoner releases in recent months. Over 30 activists were released prior to a visit by the newly appointed UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar in April and another 85 were released before the European Union troika delegation visited in January.*

*"Although these releases are a step in the right direction, 1850 political prisoners are still behind bars in various detention centres around the country."*

To begin the campaign, Amnesty International has published its first-ever list of political prisoners\*. The cases are a result of over a decade of official repression and include: students, politicians, doctors, farmers, teachers, journalists, writers, lawyers, comedians and housewives, who have been penalized for peacefully demonstrating; distributing or possessing uncensored leaflets or videos; seeking redress for human rights violations; telling jokes; wearing yellow (the colour of the NLD); or talking to foreign journalists.

Amnesty International is calling on the Myanmar government to immediately and unconditionally release all prisoners held on account of their peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of association and expression.

"The international community must continue to highlight these concerns at every opportunity. Foreign investors also have a responsibility to ensure that their operations are not contributing to human rights violations."

### **Background**

Thousands of political prisoners have been held in detention since large-scale public unrest erupted in Myanmar in March 1988, when demonstrations, initially led by students and Buddhist monks, called for an end to 26 years of military one-party rule. Hundreds were arrested in connection with elections in May 1990, when the National League for Democracy (NLD, the main opposition party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) won 60 % of valid popular votes, and 81 % of seats. After the elections, the ruling military authorities did not convene parliament or announce a timetable for the transfer of power to a civilian government, and any subsequent attempts by the NLD and other groups to influence this process have led to widespread arrests and lengthy prison terms.

*Prison conditions 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 and is used by prison guards, police officers and soldiers against political prisoners, members of ethnic minorities and criminal prisoners. Members of ethnic minorities are still being forced to work on infrastructure projects and carry heavy loads for the military.*

*\*The list is not comprehensive as access to information on individual cases is difficult to obtain. The list details 458 cases.*

*\ENDS*

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To obtain more information on the campaign, a copy of the list of prisoners or jpeg images of political prisoners, please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5729 or [mcatsani@amnesty.org](mailto:mcatsani@amnesty.org)

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