

Myanmar: Nobel laureate still under house arrest

Tomorrow more than 30 Nobel Peace Prize laureates will gather in Oslo to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Prize. Yet one of its most well-known recipients, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of Myanmar's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), cannot attend. She has been held under de facto house arrest since September 2000, and some 1,600 other political prisoners in Myanmar remain behind bars.

"On this occasion we renew our calls for her release, and for the release of hundreds of other prisoners of conscience there. We strongly urge the Myanmar government to free these people immediately -- not only because they should never have been arrested in the first place, but also because it would build international and domestic confidence in the ongoing talks between the NLD and the government," Amnesty International said today.

"These talks have been taking place for over a year now, and some 200 political prisoners were released during 2001. However the pace of releases has been slow and there are widespread calls for the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) to speed up the process."

"Large-scale releases by the SPDC would go some way in assuring all concerned that progress is being made in the confidential talks. We welcome these UN-brokered discussions, but at the same time we are reminding the SPDC that those still imprisoned will not be forgotten."

"In the last 10 years almost 600 local Amnesty groups in 30 countries have been working on behalf of some 1,000 political prisoners

in Myanmar. They will continue to work tirelessly until all these people are free," the organization said.

One of them is U Win Tin, a 71-year-old writer and NLD leader arrested in July 1989 who has been sentenced to a total of 20 years' imprisonment. He is in poor health in Insein Prison, Myanmar's largest jail. In 1995 he was punished for writing a letter to the UN Special Rapporteur about poor prison conditions and torture.

As the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is awarded the 100th Nobel Peace Prize this year, Amnesty International welcomes the positive role the UN continues to play in Myanmar. Both the newly-appointed UN Special Rapporteur and the Secretary General's Special Envoy have visited the country this year several times, in an effort to break the political deadlock between the NLD and SPDC, and to urge the government to improve its human rights record.

Background

It is now 10 years since Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize herself, while she was under house arrest for six years at her home in Yangon (Rangoon). Hundreds of political prisoners were also in jail then. Student demonstrations in December 1991 celebrating the award of the prize to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi led to hundreds of further arrests. Many of these students have not been released even though their sentences have expired.

While in 2001 there were the highest number of releases of political prisoners in Myanmar for several years, many of those who were released had reached the end of their prison terms, or had been held without charge or trial for months or even years. Hundreds of student leaders and activists, NLD party members and Members of Parliament

elect and suspected members of other opposition parties are still imprisoned.

Prisoners have also received further prison terms while in prison, for example for allegedly trying to contact the UN about prison conditions in the country, and attempting to circulate news and written materials in the prison.

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