

26 April 2001

AI Index ASA 28/008/2001 - News Service Nr. 75

Malaysia: Human rights activist at risk of torture

Today's arrest of human rights activist Badaruddin Ismail under the Internal Security Act (ISA) shows the Malaysian authorities are determined to curb legitimate activities in defence of human rights as well as political dissent, Amnesty International said today.

Badaruddin Ismail, a member of leading human rights organization Suaram, had been assisting the families of the victims of arbitrary arrest and documenting an inquiry into police brutality. No reasons for his arrest have been given and he is at risk of torture.

"The Malaysian government has cracked down on its critics by locking away ten activists, mostly from the opposition National Justice Party, in the last two weeks. None of the activists have access to their families or lawyers and all are at risk of police brutality," the organization said calling for the ten, who are prisoners of conscience, to be released immediately.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has denied the arrests of National Justice Party members were politically motivated, saying that police had evidence that they planned to use explosives and weapons in street demonstrations to overthrow the government. No such evidence has been made public or presented in court.

The Malaysian Human Rights Commission, Suhakam, which called for the release of the detainees, has been denied permission to visit them.

Suhakam, the Malaysian Bar Council, leading opposition parties, non-governmental organizations and Amnesty International have all expressed concern for the safety of the detainees and intensified their calls for the repeal of the ISA. A new coalition has been formed called the "Abolish ISA Movement".

"The Malaysian government should not ignore calls for the repeal of the ISA. Using it to silence critics is a regressive move which inflicts great damage on human rights in a free society," Amnesty International said.

More than 9,300 people around the world have signed Amnesty International's online petition (www.stoptorture.org) expressing concern for the safety of the detainees. The organization's members will continue to write directly to the Malaysian authorities urging the detainees be released and the ISA be either repealed or amended so that it no longer allows for detention without trial of those exercising their right to freedom of expression or assembly.

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