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MYANMAR: 1996 WORST YEAR FOR HUMAN RIGHTS THIS DECADE

The past year has seen an escalation in political repression in Myanmar unequalled since the violent suppression by the army of the 1988-89 popular uprising, Amnesty International said today, as it called for the international community to redouble pressure on the Burmese authorities in 1997.

During 1996 more than 2,000 people were arrested for calling for human rights reforms, severe restrictions were placed on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom of movement and speech, and members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) were attacked by organized mobs, with the apparent encouragement of the government.

"Last year was the worst for human rights in Myanmar since 1990" Amnesty International said. "Already 1997 has been marked by the long jail sentences handed down to at least 34 people detained after last year's pro-democracy demonstrations."

"While the world talks about 'constructive engagement', things are going backwards in Myanmar. Those governments with influence, particularly the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) gathering in Singapore this week, need to think again about how to pressure the Burmese authorities to improve their human rights record."

The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) throughout 1996 suppressed peaceful political meetings, gatherings and demonstrations, sometimes violently. SLORC has shown an almost complete intolerance of any peaceful political activity whatsoever. At the beginning of the year, Burmese people could gather peacefully every weekend to listen to speeches by NLD leaders. By the end of the year even this was forbidden.

In May and September, security forces arrested some 300 and 600 NLD members respectively, who were gathering for party congresses. Some of those arrested remain in detention. Hundreds of students and NLD members were arrested following the forceful breaking up of peaceful student demonstrations in December. Amnesty International is concerned that some 100 remain in prison. During the year, Aung San Suu Kyi was repeatedly refused permission to leave her compound, and was effectively confined to her house for long periods.

Amnesty International is particularly concerned at a worrying new development which emerged during the year, with violent attacks against senior members of the NLD. On 9 November, a group of about 200 young men attacked Aung San Suu Kyi's motorcade with iron bars and sticks. The men were thought to be members of the United Solidarity Development Organization (USDA), a SLORC sponsored group, and were allegedly paid 500 kyats each to participate in the attack which is believed to have been coordinated by the government.

At the same time, the state controlled media is making increasingly strident personal attacks against Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. Independent foreign reporters have been denied access to interview NLD members, and in one case, a journalist covering the demonstrations was severely beaten by the security forces.

In April 1996, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (CHR) extended the Special Rapporteur on Myanmar's mandate for another year. Amnesty International is calling for a further extension at this year's CHR, and for United Nations member states, in particular members of ASEAN, to pressure the Burmese authorities to stop denying access to the Special Rapporteur.

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