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MYANMAR: GRAVE HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS STILL CONTINUE

Despite the release of long-time prisoner of conscience Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in July this year, the human rights situation in Myanmar remains critical, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

"While we welcome some positive steps made by Myanmar's military government, thousands of political prisoners still remain behind bars -- among them at least 50 prisoners of conscience," the organization said.

"The military government's actions this year amount to giving with one hand while taking away with the other."

For example, in mid-June, less than two weeks before Aung San Suu Kyi was released, three veteran politicians were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. U Tun Shwe, U Thu Wai, and U Htwe Myint were arrested in mid-June, apparently for meeting with foreigners and criticizing the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) -- Myanmar's military government. Amnesty International considers all three to be prisoners of conscience, sentenced for the peaceful expression of their views.

Another prisoner of conscience whose case is typical is Daw San San Nwe, a well-known journalist and writer whose work has been banned in Myanmar. She was arrested in August 1994 for passing information to foreign journalists and diplomats and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in October 1994.

Conditions in prisons and labour camps in Myanmar remain extremely harsh and prisoners are subjected to beatings and other ill-treatment.

"Hundreds have died from harsh conditions and poor treatment," Amnesty International said. "Convicted criminals are also singled out for forced labour on roads and other projects in often terrible conditions."

Human rights violations occur throughout Myanmar. Civilians in the border regions, where large populations of ethnic minorities live, are at risk of arbitrary arrest. The army continues to seize members of ethnic minorities for forced portering and labour duties, holding them in unhealthy conditions for weeks or even months at a time and often subjecting them to ill-treatment.

Thousands of Mon civilians are routinely seized by the army to work on the Ye-Tavoy railway in southeast Myanmar. Thousands of others have been forced to carry supplies and ammunition for the army, and are beaten or even shot if they cannot carry their loads or attempt to escape. Villagers can also be shot dead if the army suspects them of contact with armed ethnic minority groups.

The SLORC has claimed repeatedly that there are no human rights violations in Myanmar. They have also stated that there are different versions of human rights standards which vary from one culture to the next. Amnesty International respects and recognizes cultural

diversity, but always upholds the principles of the integrity and universality of human rights standards.

Although the SLORC has made some improvements in human rights, including the reported release of over 2,000 political prisoners since April 1992, the abolition of military tribunals, and the lifting of curfew restrictions, more profound changes in both human rights policy and practice are urgently needed.

Amnesty International is calling on the SLORC to release all prisoners of conscience, abolish the practices of forced labour and portering, and to put an end to torture and ill-treatment throughout the country.

The organization is also urging the international community to reaffirm its commitment to the protection of human rights in Myanmar.

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