

0001 hrs gmt Friday 8 October 1993

MYANMAR: CLIMATE OF FEAR AMID ON-GOING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Life in Myanmar (Burma) is characterized by fear, intimidation and widespread human rights violations, according to a report issued by Amnesty International today.

Behind the closed borders of Myanmar, the military authorities conduct a reign of terror, with hundreds of political opponents still behind bars and members of minority groups in particular subjected to arbitrary detention, torture and summary executions.

Some 2,000 political prisoners have been released from Myanmar jails in the last 18 months - but, says Amnesty International, their release did not mark real freedom. Those released are still subject to intense intimidation, surveillance by the all-pervasive military intelligence and other restrictions on their freedom.

"The authorities have created such a climate of fear that political opponents rarely dare to speak out. When they do, the authorities don't hesitate to arrest them," said Amnesty International.

Myanmar's ruling military authority, The State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), has been responsible for serious human rights violations since it seized power in 1988. Today, those violations include:

• **Political imprisonment** - hundreds of political prisoners, at least 66 of them prisoners of conscience, are still behind bars. They include

Nobel Peace Prize winner Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, now in her fifth year of house arrest.

• **Unfair trials** - long-term political prisoners and people arrested recently are serving sentences imposed at blatantly unfair trials.

• **Torture and ill-treatment** - Members of ethnic minorities are routinely seized in their villages and fields by the military, accused of supporting insurgents, and severely beaten or subjected to near-suffocation. Rape is frequently reported among ethnic minority women being forced to work for the military.

• **Deaths in custody** - at least seven new cases have come to light, including two prisoners apparently beaten to death.

• **Forced labour** - civilians, particularly members of ethnic minorities, are routinely and arbitrarily forced to work as porters and unpaid labour for the military. Conditions are so harsh they often die in service or are simply executed when no longer useful.

Historically, it is the ethnic minorities who live in Myanmar's mountainous border regions who have borne the brunt of the gross human rights violations committed by the military. Today they are still suffering from torture including rape, forced labour and killings.

In some regions, particularly among the Karen people, the SLORC has faced armed opposition - and has responded with a brutal crackdown on civilians. Villagers are arbitrarily seized to act as porters for the military and worked so hard that they collapse from exhaustion, whereupon they are left to die or are killed outright by their military taskmasters.

Women and even youngsters have not been spared harsh labour. One nursing mother was forced to work for the army, carrying sacks of rice on her back and her young baby at her breast.

Women and teenage girls taken as porters have also been raped. A 16-year-old Muslim girl told Amnesty International of her treatment:

"they would come and pull girls out from the group and make the girls sleep with them... all of them were very rough with us girls, treated us not like humans.... They would take us all the time."

Despite some positive steps by the SLORC, including the abolition of military tribunals, to respond to international criticism of its human rights record, the human rights situation in Myanmar is clearly still grim and needs urgent attention, says Amnesty International.

"The SLORC appears to have little desire or will to stop the practice of human rights violations which is now entrenched in the military," said the human rights organization. "That must change.

"The authorities must recognise the obligations they have to uphold human rights standards, not continue to flout them."

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 HRS GMT FRIDAY 8 OCTOBER 1993