

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 16/028/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 338
12 December 2005

Embargo Date: 12 December 2005 07:30 GMT

Myanmar: Increasing misuse of courts to silence peaceful dissent

The human rights situation in Myanmar has deteriorated during 2005, with the Myanmar authorities increasingly using the justice system as a tool to stifle peaceful dissent. As the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) meets, Amnesty International is sending the Myanmar authorities thousands of petitions from across the world urging them to stop punishing peaceful dissent and to release all prisoners of conscience.

Amnesty International is also urging ASEAN and other governments to use their influence with Myanmar to effect real change in a situation which has seen no significant improvement for seventeen years.

"People are being prosecuted for reporting human rights violations and talking to journalists. Lengthy prison sentences are handed down to political figures for engaging in political discussion. Torture continues, and people are dying in suspicious circumstances in prisons," said Purna Sen, Asia-Pacific Director at Amnesty International, as she launched a report on Myanmar at the ASEAN summit in Kuala Lumpur.

"The use of imprisonment to silence senior political leaders is presenting a significant obstacle to a resolution of the political deadlock in the country," she said.

Sentencing of peaceful government critics and opposition supporters has increased. Laws excessively restrict basic rights, and trials are not fair. The harassment of political party members at the local level has become more pervasive. Local opposition supporters are also being sentenced under trumped-up criminal charges.

Professional licences for private tutors have been withdrawn on political grounds. Rohingyas -- Muslims from western Myanmar -- are being imprisoned for travelling without official permission. Censorship has tightened, and teachers, doctors and others are imprisoned for talking about or possessing books about historical political figures.

"The justice system should guarantee rights, instead it is consistently being used to deny and undermine them. The Myanmar authorities must reform judicial procedures and laws," said Purna Sen.

"It is the responsibility of all governments to ensure that flagrant violations do not continue in Myanmar. ASEAN has a particular responsibility to address grave human rights violations in one of its member states."

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