

MYANMAR: Students given lengthy prison terms for a peaceful demonstration



Thet Naung Soe,
c.private

Khin Maung Win, a 2nd year law student and **Thet Naung Soe**, a final year law student (pictured) were arrested for holding a peaceful demonstration in the capital of Myanmar on 18 August 2002. They are serving sentences of seven and 14 years' imprisonment respectively. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release. They are imprisoned in Insein Prison and are among at least 1,200 political prisoners in the country, many of whom were sentenced for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

On 18 August 2002 Thet Naung Soe demonstrated outside Yangon City Hall, where, on 8 August 1988, soldiers shot and killed hundreds of students, monks and other protestors peacefully demonstrating against one party rule. He unfurled a red flag with a flying peacock on it, a traditional symbol of political opposition and student resistance in Myanmar. On 17 August 2002 students had reportedly distributed a statement calling for the release of political prisoners, for progress in political dialogue between military ruling authorities and the National League for Democracy (NLD, the political party that won election in 1990, and to whom authorities failed to transfer power) and announcing that

Thet Naung Soe was to hold a protest the following day as an exercise of the right to freedom of expression. Thet Naung Soe was reportedly immediately arrested after unfurling his flag, and according to a witness "*he was quickly apprehended by the police..he followed with a smile.*" Khin Maung Win was also arrested. A number of students were arrested around this time, and with the exception of Khin Maung Win and Thet Naung Soe, all were released after five or six days of detention for interrogation by military intelligence.

Khin Maung Win and Thet Naung Soe were tried on 23 October 2002 at a special court in Insein Prison, the largest prison in Myanmar. NLD lawyers arrived at the prison to offer their support, but were prevented from appearing in court by authorities. By this time Thet Naung Soe had already received a sentence to 14 years imprisonment. NLD lawyers were able to represent Khin Maung Win, who was later sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment. AI believes that they did not receive a fair trial. They were sentenced under the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act, a vaguely worded law that is frequently used to silence dissent in the country and effectively criminalizes peaceful political activity.

Many students and others are serving lengthy prison terms for organizing or participating in peaceful demonstrations, and some remain in prison under administrative detention laws, despite the expiry of their prison sentences. Student union leader and prisoner of conscience Paw U Tun, also known as Min Ko Naing, for example, has been imprisoned since 1989 even though his prison sentence expired nearly four years ago.

The sentencing of Khin Maung Win and Thet Naung Soe is the second time in less than a year that authorities have penalized people for peacefully demonstrating outside City Hall, Yangon. Prisoner of conscience Dr. Salai Tun Than, a 74 year old professor and retired rector, is also serving a sentence of seven years' imprisonment for handing out copies of a petition calling for political reforms in front of Yangon City Hall in November 2001.

PLEASE WRITE

- expressing concern at the imprisonment of Thet Naung Soe and Khin Maung Win for peacefully expressing their right to freedom of assembly;
- urging authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them from detention;
- urging authorities to review the legislation under which they were sentenced and to revoke or amend it to make it to conform to international standards;
- urging authorities not to penalize anyone for their peaceful expression of the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression.

To:

Senior General Than Shwe
Chairman
State Peace and Development Council
Ministry of Defence
Dagon Post Office
Yangon, Union of Myanmar

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Salutation: Dear General

General Khin Nyunt
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