

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 16/002/2004 (Public)
News Service No: 070
31 March 2004

Embargo Date: 31 March 2004 23:01 GMT

Myanmar: Respect human rights during the National Convention

The human rights situation in Myanmar remains serious, a new report published by Amnesty International today reveals. There are an estimated 1300 -- 1400 political prisoners, many of them prisoners of conscience; and political arrests continue in the run-up to the National Convention.

"Arbitrary arrests; torture and ill-treatment during incommunicado detention; unfair trials; and laws which greatly curtail the rights to freedom of expression and assembly are major obstacles to any improvement in Myanmar's human rights record," Amnesty International said.

Last year for the first time in its history Amnesty International was allowed to visit the country, most recently in December. *Myanmar: The administration of justice -- grave and abiding concerns* reflects information gathered from meetings with government officials, interviews with political prisoners and discussions with members of Myanmar civil society.

Ahead of the National Convention, due to be held this year, Amnesty International continues to call for all prisoners of conscience to be released and for State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government) to ensure that human rights are protected both during the National Convention and in the new Constitution.

"In particular the SPDC must ensure that the rights to freedom of speech and association are guaranteed during the Convention and that no one is arrested for exercising those rights. Similarly it is vital that human rights safeguards be incorporated in the draft constitution."

Many legitimate participants in a constitution-drafting process are imprisoned or held under *de facto* house arrest. These include members of parliament-elect from several political parties; young political leaders; and other prominent members of civil society.

Arrests, surveillance, and intimidation of members of opposition political parties continue in the lead-up to the National Convention. Members and leaders of these parties have been followed, interrogated, and intimidated for attempting to engage in legitimate and peaceful political activities. Some have been arrested for their non-violent protests, for example, calling for all political prisoners to be released.

"Such developments do not foster an environment in which participants in the National Convention feel able to take part in a free and open manner. Legitimate participants still in prison must be

released and political arrests must stop immediately," Amnesty International said.

At the time of the last National Convention process from 1993 -- 1996, some delegates were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment for expressing criticism about the process. The Convention is now being reconvened by the SPDC as part of a seven step "roadmap" to political transition.

The new report also expresses extensive and ongoing concerns about the arrest and pre-trial detention process for political detainees. These include arbitrary arrest by Military Intelligence (MI) personnel; prolonged interrogation accompanied by torture and ill-treatment; incommunicado pre-trial detention, including denial of access to lawyers, families, and adequate medical care; and the inability of the accused to challenge the legality of their detention. Political trials are often summary and fall far short of international standards, where detainees are routinely denied the right to legal counsel, the right to be presumed innocent, and the right to cross-examine witnesses,

"Torture and ill-treatment of political detainees continue to occur in Myanmar. It is vital that the SPDC ensure that the police force and Military Intelligence personnel do not hold political detainees in prolonged incommunicado detention, a practice which facilitates torture.

"To demonstrate their commitment to all all-inclusive, transparent National Convention Process, the SPDC must release all prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally. Selective release of a few individuals will not dispel an atmosphere of fear and repression that could undermine the process. Reform of the criminal justice system including reform of legislation which has long been used to stifle political dissent should also be given priority with the transition process," Amnesty International concluded.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>