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Myanmar: Amnesty International welcomes first visit, calls for further improvements

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After its first ever visit to Myanmar, Amnesty International called upon the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, Myanmar's military government), to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience still held throughout the country.

"The continued imprisonment of between 1200 - 1300 political prisoners, many of whom we believe are prisoners of conscience, held solely for their peaceful political activities, was one of the key issues discussed with the local authorities," Amnesty International said during a press conference held today in Bangkok, Thailand.

The organization, which had been requesting access to Myanmar since 1988, welcomed the efforts made by the government officials in Myanmar to accommodate the delegation's requests and the frank discussions it held with Ministers, police and prison officials.

During the visit, Amnesty International's delegation also met with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi - in her capacity as General Secretary of the National League for Democracy (NLD) and with members and supporters of the NLD. The delegates talked to representatives of various international organizations and the diplomatic and business communities as well as visiting detention facilities, including Insein Prison in Yangon and the Guard Ward at the Yangon General Hospital.

The delegation's meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi took place on 31 January at her residence.

"We discussed various issues of mutual concern during a cordial two-hour-meeting," Amnesty International said explaining that the content of the discussions is confidential, as agreed with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

Amnesty International views this visit as the start of a process, which should result in the organization's return to the country for research purposes.

"One of our key objectives on this visit was to meet with as many people in Yangon as possible, and to lay the groundwork for travel to other parts of the country to conduct research later this year," the organization continued.

At the end of the visit, the delegates offered written recommendations for immediate action to

alleviate suffering in prisons and detention facilities, specifically that all prisoners including those held for political reasons should have access to reading and writing materials and should not be held in isolation.

During the meetings with SPDC officials, Amnesty International also raised cases of recently arrested political prisoners and appealed for the immediate release on humanitarian grounds of one such prisoner held in Insein Prison in Yangon with her 18 month old child.

The organization awaits an early response from the SPDC to its recommendations.

Amnesty International's concerns in Myanmar are wide-ranging, and its discussions touched on many different issues, while focusing on the administration of justice.

"Without good laws, appropriate policing, fair trials, and humane conditions of detention, violations can and will continue, violators will remain unpunished and victims will have no chance of gaining redress," Amnesty International said.

Background

The visit took place between 30 January and 8 February 2003. It was Amnesty International's first visit to Myanmar. The delegates for this mission were Demelza Stubbings, Program Director for the Asia Pacific Region; and Donna Guest, Researcher on Myanmar and Thailand.

It is Amnesty International's policy to seek visits to all countries around the world, in order to investigate the human rights situation, and to hold talks with the authorities and other actors with the aim of protecting and promoting human rights.

For an official statement by the head of the delegation made during the press conference in Bangkok, visit our website www.news.amnesty.org or <http://web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/recent/ASA160052003!Open>

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