

13 July 2001

AI Index ASA 16/018/2001 - News Service Nr. 121

Myanmar: The Moustache Brothers are released!

Amnesty International welcomes the release today of prisoners of conscience U Pa Pa Lay and his cousin U Lu Zaw, two Burmese comedians known as "the Moustache Brothers", and their colleagues U Aung Soe and U Htwe. They have been the focus of widespread and sustained campaigning by Amnesty International members around the world for the last five years.

"We are delighted that the four, who have been imprisoned since 1996, have finally been released. We hope that they can soon return to the business of making jokes and entertaining the Burmese people without fear," Amnesty International said today.

Thousands of Amnesty members around the world have called for the release of U Pa Pa Lay and his friends. The international campaign has featured performances by famous fellow comics, articles in national newspapers, Myanmar embassy vigils, a joint action by the Body Shop and Amnesty International, and a play performed by high school students in their honour. Local Amnesty International groups in Belgium, Canada, Faroe Islands, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, UK, USA, and Sweden, have worked tirelessly during the last five years on their case.

The two comedians, U Pa Pa Lay, 49, and U Lu Zaw, 45, were sentenced in March 1996 to seven years' imprisonment for one of their comic performances. U Htwe and U Aung Soe, two political activists who arranged this performance, were also sentenced to seven years' imprisonment.

On 4 January 1996, the anniversary of Myanmar's independence from the UK, U Pa Pa Lay's Anyeint troupe, a traditional Burmese entertainment group, performed for a celebration at the home of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in Yangon (Rangoon, the capital). She is the leader of the main opposition party National League for Democracy and is currently held under de facto house arrest.

In their routine U Pa Pa Lay and U Lu Zaw joked about government cooperatives as thieves and sang a comic song about Myanmar's generals. Following the performance, they were arrested after they returned to their homes in Mandalay. U Aung Soe and U Htwe, two NLD members who had arranged the performance, were also arrested.

Background

In early April 1996 U Pa Pa Lay and U Lu Zaw were transferred from prison to Kyein Kran Ka labour camp, 25 miles from Myitkyina in Kachin State. They were forced to work with iron bars across their legs and their health deteriorated. U Pa Pa Lay was later transferred to Myitkyina Prison, Kachin State and U Lu Zaw to Katha Prison, Sagaing Division.

The NLD won over 80% of seats in the May 1990 elections. Despite this victory, the ruling military authorities - the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) - has not handed over power to the NLD nor convened parliament.

In October 2000 the SPDC and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi embarked on confidential talks, the contents of which have not been made public. Beginning in January 2001, the SPDC began to release some political prisoners. With the release of U Pa Pa Lay and his friends, 147

prisoners have been released so far. However some 1800 prisoners, including scores of prisoners of conscience, remain behind bars.

Amnesty International welcomes the recent releases and encourages the SPDC to release all those held solely for peacefully expressing their beliefs, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

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