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MYANMAR : AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS DETENTION OF AT LEAST 220 PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS

Amnesty International today strongly condemned the detention of some 220 pro-democracy activists -- mostly members of parliament-elect -- by the military authorities over the past four days.

“It is outrageous that these pro-democracy activists were arrested simply for planning to attend a meeting next week,” Amnesty International said today. “The military authorities may have described the round-up as a ‘pre-emptive measure’, but it clearly shows their inability to tolerate any form of dissent.”

Amnesty International welcomes the public condemnation made by the Australian, Japanese, British and US governments, but is calling on more governments -- particularly members of ASEAN -- to put pressure on the Myanmar authorities about human rights concerns during Myanmar’s Year of Tourism.

Most of those arrested are members of parliament-elect of the National League for Democracy (NLD, the opposition party founded by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) which is planning a meeting at Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s home to mark the sixth anniversary of its victory in the elections. The meeting is to take place from 26-29 May. The arrests have been widely seen as an attempt by the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC, Myanmar’s military authorities) to prevent the meeting from occurring. Amnesty International is concerned that the military authorities have arrested a further nine NLD youth activists today.

The scale of these arrests is the largest to take place in Myanmar since the mass detentions in 1990. The current wave of arrests began on 20 May and at last report is still continuing throughout the country. Amnesty International has obtained the names of 101 of those who have been arrested and believes that the numbers of those detained are likely to increase.

The authorities have apparently not brought charges against members of the group, who are being detained at unknown locations around the country. It is likely that they are being held in incommunicado detention, which in Myanmar is a standard practice before political detainees are tried and sentenced. Amnesty International is concerned that the MPs could be facing torture and ill-treatment and seeks assurances from the Myanmar authorities that they have access to proper medical care, their families and lawyers.

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of all those arrested solely for exercising their right to freedom of expression and association. It is also seeking information about the whereabouts of all those detained and the exact charges against them.

BACKGROUND

Tension in Myanmar has mounted recently between the SLORC and the NLD. Attacks against the NLD in the government-controlled press have increased markedly.

According to reports, the SLORC stated publicly on 23 May that the activists are being held for questioning and are not in fact imprisoned. The SLORC also stated that they were being treated well. The reason given for their detention was that they had taken a “confrontational stance” with regards to the SLORC. It is unclear from government statements whether the activists will be released shortly or whether they will continue to be detained.

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