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Arrest of 54 people increases deep divisions in Myanmar's society

The arrest of 54 people – revealed in a statement made today by Myanmar's military authorities claiming that the peaceful opposition is involved in a “conspiracy” to overthrow the government – is outrageous and will do nothing to heal the wounds caused by 10 years of terrible human rights violations, Amnesty International said today.

“It is appalling that the State Peace and Development Council, SPDC, has made these tendentious claims against the peaceful opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), meanwhile arbitrarily arresting dozens of people who are probably prisoners of conscience,” the organization said. “The NLD has always called for peaceful political change and dialogue with the military.”

The SPDC issued a 15-page statement, providing details of people involved in a plot to “incite unrest”. However after reading the document Amnesty International can find no evidence that any of those named engaged in anything other than peaceful civil disobedience in Myanmar.

Amnesty International calls on the SPDC to release these people immediately unless they are tried fairly for recognizable criminal offences. The organization is further concerned that the 54 are at risk of torture, which is common in Myanmar's detention centres. Political prisoners held in Military Intelligence centres are often interrogated, severely beaten, and deprived of sleep and food.

BACKGROUND

The NLD, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, called on the SPDC to convene the parliament elected in 1990 by 21 August 1998. When the deadline passed, the NLD said they would convene it themselves – but before they could do so, the SPDC arrested hundreds of NLD members-of-parliament-elect and other activists. These people remain in detention along with hundreds of students and others arrested in the last four months.

According to the SPDC statement, young people and students have been distributing leaflets in Myanmar calling for the convening of the parliament and support for the NLD. The statement also claims that these groups have been supported financially by Western organizations.

The statement comes one day after Mary Robinson, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the European Union issued statements calling on the SPDC to immediately release all political prisoners in Myanmar and to begin a process of national reconciliation.

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