

MYANMAR:

Nuns sentenced for a peaceful demonstration



Ma Tin Tin Oo



Ma Than Htay

Buddhist nuns, **Ma Than Htay**, also known by her Buddhist name as Mar Lar Yee and **Ma Tin Tin Oo**, also known as Thayzawaddy, were arrested on 16 January 2003 for staging a peaceful demonstration in Yangon, the capital of Myanmar. They are serving sentences of thirteen years' imprisonment. Amnesty International considers them to be prisoners of conscience and is calling for their immediate and unconditional release. They are among at least 1,350 political prisoners in the country, many of whom were sentenced for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, assembly and association.

On 16 January 2003 the nuns, both of whom are believed to be in their early 20s, demonstrated near Yangon City Hall. They held up red flags with flying peacocks on them, a traditional symbol of political opposition and student resistance in Myanmar, and a photograph of General Aung San.¹ They reportedly shouted slogans calling for authorities to lower the price of commodities such as rice and cooking oil, and handed out leaflets calling for progress in political dialogue between the military government and the National League for Democracy (NLD, the political party that won election in 1990, and to whom authorities failed to transfer power) and the release of political prisoners. The City Hall was where on 8 August 1988, soldiers shot and killed hundreds of students, monks and other protestors peacefully demonstrating against one party rule in Myanmar.

On the following day authorities stated in a press conference the nuns were arrested for having distributed "*pamphlets to agitate the people to stage demonstrations*" at 9.30 am on 16 January 2003, and for then shouting slogans outside City Hall at 9.45 am. Officials accused the nuns of "*trying to instigate the people under the guise of nuns*", and added that they had attended courses on political defiance, democracy and human rights in Thailand. Authorities characterized the demonstration as a "*scheme of the expatriate NLD insurgent group to commit destructive acts at the expense of religion,*"² and stated that Ma Than Htay had become a nun only shortly before, after working as a migrant worker in Thailand.

The peaceful exercise of the rights of freedom of expression, association and assembly is strongly restricted in Myanmar, and when individuals engage in symbolic acts of dissent, such as peaceful

¹ A national leader assassinated in 1947, who had campaigned for Myanmar's independence from the United Kingdom. His daughter, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, is the General Secretary of the National League for Democracy.

² Press conference held by the State Peace and Development Council on 17th January 2003

demonstrations, these are often construed by authorities as attempts to incite unrest, and penalized with terms of imprisonment. Amnesty International has no information about their trial, but in most cases political prisoners have limited or no access to legal counsel, and often are sentenced in trials which do not meet international standards for fairness. They were reportedly sentenced under the Unlawful Associations Act, and the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act, a vaguely worded law that is frequently used to silence dissent in the country, and that effectively criminalizes peaceful political activity, and.

This is the third time since December 2001 that authorities have imprisoned people for peaceful demonstrations outside City Hall. Law students Thet Naung Soe and Khin Maung Win were sentenced to fourteen and seven years' respectively for staging a similar protest outside City Hall in mid August 2002. Professor Salai Tun Than was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment for staging a one man protest outside Yangon City Hall in December 2001 and was released in May 2003. To Amnesty International's knowledge, Ma Than Htay and Ma Thin Thin Oo are the only Buddhist nuns imprisoned in Myanmar. There are scores of Buddhist monks detained on account of their political activities.

PLEASE WRITE

- expressing concern at the imprisonment of Ma Than Htay and Ma Tin Tin Oo for peacefully expressing their right to freedom of assembly;
- urging authorities to immediately and unconditionally release them from detention, and pending their release to give them access to relatives and medical care, and to hold them in conditions which match international standards, including with access to reading and writing materials, and anything required to satisfy the needs of their religious life;
- urging authorities to review the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act and the Unlawful Associations Act under which they were sentenced and to revoke or amend them to make them conform to international standards;
- urging authorities not to penalize anyone for their peaceful expression of the rights to freedom of assembly, association and expression.

To:

Senior General Than Shwe
Chairman
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Yangon, Union of Myanmar

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Salutation: Dear General

General Khin Nyunt
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