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MALAYSIA: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL DEPLORES THREATS OF ARREST OF
PEACEFUL ACTIVISTS UNDER NATIONAL SECURITY LAW

The Malaysian authorities should immediately lift threats of arrest and detention without charge or trial made against several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seeking to hold a forum to discuss cases of alleged abuses of police power, Amnesty International said today.

Government officials have threatened to use the Internal Security Act (ISA) to prevent more than 100 members of 10 Malaysian NGOs from attending the proposed forum. The meeting, originally set for 15 December, has been postponed until 12 January 1997.

“These NGO members should have the right to meet peacefully to express their opinions about issues of legitimate public interest without the authorities threatening to arrest them for national security reasons,” Amnesty International said. “If detained they would be considered prisoners of conscience and we will demand their immediate release.”

Amnesty International deplores the government’s continued use of “national security” reasons to justify threats of arrest of peaceful activists and indefinite detention without trial and is dismayed by threatening comments made by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on 18 December, when he labelled local NGOs “traitors” and accused them of seeking to damage Malaysia’s international reputation.

The Malaysian NGOs seeking to attend the forum include women, lawyers, indigenous peoples and other human rights groups. They are seeking to examine allegations that abuses of police power have increased in recent years, and have invited senior police officers to participate in the forum.

Amnesty International welcomes reports of dialogue with the police regarding these allegations, and urges the Malaysian police force to uphold its established traditions of public service by addressing and resolving issues of public concern.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Amnesty International is concerned that the ISA and other restrictive legislation will be increasingly used against Malaysian NGO members seeking to peacefully express their opinion on domestic and international human rights issues. This concern grew after 58 local participants attending the second international Asia Pacific Conference on East Timor (APCET 11) held in Kuala Lumpur in November 1996 were temporarily detained under the Police Act. The conference was forcibly broken up by youth members of the United Malays National Organisation-led ruling coalition after government officials stated that the gathering could potentially damage Malaysian-Indonesian relations.

As with the APCET conference Malaysian NGOs assert that the planned forum on alleged police abuses constitutes a legal gathering because it is by invitation only and not held in public.

The ISA allows the Minister of Home Affairs or his deputy to order the detention without charge or trial of any person deemed to be a threat to the “national security or economic life of Malaysia”. The Ministers are empowered to issue two-year detention orders, renewable indefinitely.

In 1987 more than 100 people including prominent politicians, trade unionists, Chinese educationalists, Islamic teachers and church and community workers were arrested and accused of provoking racial and religious tensions. At least 40 were given two year detention orders and adopted as Amnesty International prisoners of conscience.

Since then, the number of ISA detainees held for political reasons has declined and in early 1996 the government announced that all remaining ISA detainees were being held for identity and travel document forgeries. However the government has rejected calls to repeal the Act and between May and June 1996, 18 former members of the banned *Al Arqam* Islamic sect were arrested under the ISA. At least nine were subsequently given two year detention orders for “acting in a manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia”.

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