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Myanmar: Prison sentence reductions are not enough

The Myanmar government's reduction of prison terms must be swiftly followed by the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience, Amnesty International said today.

The Myanmar government said on Monday it had reduced by one year the sentences of all current prisoners and commuted all death sentences to life imprisonment.

"While the reductions are welcome news for political prisoners, they are astonishingly insufficient", said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar researcher. "These actions fall well short of the comprehensive release of all prisoners of conscience desperately needed in Myanmar".

Amnesty International also called upon Myanmar to go beyond commuting death sentences and join the worldwide trend towards the complete abolition of the death penalty.

While no death row prisoner in Myanmar is known to have been executed since 1988, the death penalty is still in the statute books and death sentences continue to be imposed.

"The commutation of these death sentences is encouraging, but the next move should be to bring about all necessary legislative changes to abolish the death penalty in Myanmar", said Zawacki.

The Myanmar authorities hold over 2,200 political prisoners, many of whom have been subjected to torture and other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. They are held in poor conditions in prisons that lack adequate medical treatment and are often located far away from prisoners' families.

The international community has repeatedly called on the Myanmar authorities to release political prisoners, especially in the run-up to the country's first elections in 20 years that took place in November 2010. However, at the January 2011 United Nations Human Rights Council, Myanmar government representatives denied that there were any political prisoners in the country.

"The Myanmar government has for decades used imprisonment to silence peaceful dissent, opting for sentence reductions and selective periodic amnesties as a small concession to international criticism of its human rights record," said Zawacki.

Last week, Mr. Vijay Nambiar, Special Adviser to the UN Secretary-General, stressed the release of all political prisoners during his first post-elections visit to Myanmar.

Amnesty International also urged Myanmar to take concrete steps toward guaranteeing basic freedoms.

"The authorities should repeal or amend laws and practices that arbitrarily restrict rights, such as the Electronic Transactions Law that prevents the reporting of views critical of the government, and should ensure that the judiciary is free from political interference and other abuses", said Zawacki.