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Myanmar: Government must go further with prisoner release

The release of at least 120 political prisoners in Myanmar today is a minimum first step, and authorities must immediately and unconditionally release all remaining prisoners of conscience, Amnesty International has said.

Prisoners of conscience make up the majority of the political prisoners still jailed after the measure.

“This release of political prisoners is welcome, but is not consistent with the authorities’ recent promises of political reform in Myanmar,” said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International’s Myanmar researcher. “Unless the figure rises substantially, it will constitute a relaxation of reform efforts rather than a bold step forward”.

Since late 2007, some 2,000 people have been imprisoned on political grounds in Myanmar, about half of them because of their peaceful participation in that year’s “Saffron Revolution”. Among those released today is Zaw Htet Ko Ko, a member of the 88 Generation Student Group and a participant in those demonstrations. In September 2009, a prisoner amnesty included 127 political prisoners.

“Today’s amnesty does not distinguish Myanmar’s new government from its previous military government,” said Benjamin Zawacki. “If Myanmar’s authorities are serious about demonstrating their commitment to reform, this must be only the first step towards a release of all political prisoners as soon as possible”.

Amnesty International noted that if authorities have reason to believe that political prisoners have committed an internationally recognized offence, they should give them a prompt, fair, and public trial. Otherwise, they should release them unconditionally and without delay.

“They should not try them on spurious charges or hold them indefinitely,” said Benjamin Zawacki.

In Myanmar, political prisoners are regularly charged under vaguely worded laws, mostly relating to security or public order concerns, which allow excessively broad interpretation by the authorities.

Prison conditions in Myanmar fall far short of many international standards. Food, water and medical care are insufficient; many political prisoners are held far away from their families; and most have been subjected to torture and other ill-treatment, including prolonged solitary confinement.

“Releasing some political prisoners is a positive measure, but reforming Myanmar’s repressive judiciary and security apparatus is long overdue,” said Benjamin Zawacki.

Amnesty International called on the Myanmar authorities to follow through today’s prisoner release by ending repression of political activism.

“Many of the prisoners released today are likely to continue their political activity, and they should not be

thrown in jail again for exercising their basic rights,” said Benjamin Zawacki.

In the past, many political prisoners have been re-arrested shortly after being released. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Myanmar’s political opposition, was released from house arrest in November 2010 after spending over 15 of 21 years in detention—having been detained and released three times.

In his 27 September 2011 statement to the UN General Assembly, Myanmar Foreign Minister U Wunna Maung Lwin stated that the “steps taken by Myanmar are concrete, visible, and irreversible”.

“Myanmar must not only uphold this claim, but improve its human rights record, including ceasing widespread and systematic violations against ethnic minority civilians,” said Benjamin Zawacki.

“Any meaningful claim by the authorities to political reform in Myanmar must involve putting an end to crimes against humanity against their own population”.

Amnesty International continued to call for an international Commission of Inquiry into serious international crimes in Myanmar.

Background

At the UN Human Rights Council in January 2011, Myanmar authorities denied holding any political prisoners, claiming that all those behind bars were criminals. In August 2011, Myanmar’s Minister of Home Affairs Lt. Gen. Ko Ko, reportedly told the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar that “over 100 prisoners” said to be prisoners of conscience had committed criminal offences.

Among other prisoners of conscience released today is comedian Zarganar, imprisoned in June 2008 for his humanitarian efforts in the wake of Cyclone Nargis.

A prisoner of conscience whom Amnesty International spoke with just hours before he was detained in October 2007, Htay Kywe, is serving a 64-year term in a cell measuring 2.4 meters by three meters in Buthidaung prison, over 1,000 kilometers from his home in Yangon. He has been tortured in prison. It is not yet known if he is among those released today.