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Myanmar: Political activists detained in run-up to new constitution

In the run-up to the drafting of a new constitution, the Burmese authorities have extended the detention of prisoner of conscience U Tin Oo and other opposition leaders and have arrested seven political activists from the Shan minority.

"We strongly condemn these actions and urge the authorities to release these people, along with the many other prisoners of conscience in the country," said Natalie Hill, deputy Asia director at Amnesty International. "The Burmese authorities must also amend those laws and practices which have been routinely used to deny people their rights to peaceful political activity."

U Tin Oo, 77, is the vice-chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD), and has been under house arrest without charge or trial for 20 months. On 13 February the authorities extended his detention for another year under the State Protection Law, which allows for the detention of political figures without ever bringing them to court.

The seven political activists from Shan political groups were arrested on 8 and 9 February. They included senior Shan Nationalities League for Democracy leaders and political veteran U Shwe Ohn, 82. The whereabouts of six of the men are unknown, and they are believed to have been detained in connection with a meeting of senior Shan leaders. U Shwe Ohn is being held under house arrest.

Myanmar's National Convention -- a meeting to draft principles for a new constitution -- begins tomorrow. Many of those currently detained or in prison are legitimate delegates. Opposition parties are boycotting the sessions stating their conditions for attendance -- including the release of opposition leaders -- have not been met.

"Drafting a new constitution could be a great opportunity for a country to make progress by guaranteeing the human rights of all its citizens," said Ms Hill. "But in Myanmar this opportunity has been marred by the ongoing imprisonment of peaceful political activists and the recent arrests of yet more political figures. This is a time when authorities should be providing assurances that people will not be penalized for peaceful political discussions. Instead, by arresting and extending detention, the authorities send an unequivocal message that peaceful political activities will not be tolerated."

"The justice system has for years been systematically abused to imprison peaceful political critics," said Ms Hill. "It is unacceptable that people are detained without even having the chance to challenge their detention in court."

Background

There are more than 1300 political prisoners in Myanmar, many of whom are suffering from serious health problems exacerbated by their treatment in detention.

In the last month authorities have also extended the detention under the 1975 State Protection Law for a further year of Dr Than Nyein and Dr May Win Myint, two senior NLD Members of Parliament elect. The two have already served a seven year prison sentence, solely for organising an NLD meeting.

Aung San Suu Kyi, NLD general secretary, is among the at least 18 persons currently held under the 1975 State Protection Law. Authorities extended her detention by a further year in November 2004. She has been held for at least nine of the last fifteen years without charge or trial.

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