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Cyclone Nargis: One year on, 21 people imprisoned for helping the victims

One year after Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar, 21 people remain behind bars for their cyclone relief efforts. Amnesty International calls on the Myanmar government to release these prisoners of conscience immediately and without condition.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) should also urge the Myanmar government, an ASEAN member, to free those who were imprisoned. As the driving force behind the Tripartite Core Group, comprising ASEAN, the government and the UN, in coordinating massive relief efforts it has a duty to ensure that people delivering aid can do so without fear of intimidation or arrest.

In the aftermath of the cyclone, Burmese people from all walks of life have been working together to distribute aid from private donors in order to rebuild the devastated areas.

“This is an untold story behind the cyclone. At the same time as relief efforts have moved forward, the Myanmar government has penalized people for assisting,” said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International’s Myanmar specialist. “The authorities should immediately release these 21 people, who are among the over 2,100 political prisoners in Myanmar.”

So far 20 people have been sentenced in unfair trials. Six are serving sentences ranging from 10 to 35 years. All of them were arrested for delivering aid to the victims, for reporting on the cyclone, and even for burying the dead.

“One year on, when we mark the first anniversary of Nargis, we should not forget those prisoners who are serving long sentences for trying to help their fellow Burmese,” Benjamin Zawacki said. “Indirectly they have also become victims of the cyclone.”

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Background

Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar on 2-3 May 2008. The natural disaster soon evolved into a humanitarian and human rights crisis when for three weeks the Myanmar government rejected international assistance to provide the necessary relief effort. More than 84,500 people died, tens of thousands are still missing, and some 2.4 million had their homes destroyed or were otherwise affected.

Seven of the 21 people who are in detention for their cyclone relief activities are being held in prisons far from their homes. Political prisoners are now increasingly liable to being moved to remote locations. Their families must undertake long journeys to visit them, sometimes up to nine days. Because of the poor

conditions and inadequate medical care in Myanmar's prisons, political prisoners often rely on their families to provide them with basic medicines, food and clothing.

One of them is popular comedian Zarganar, serving a 35-year prison sentence for leading a private donor movement that emerged in the aftermath of the cyclone. He was arrested on 4 June 2008, after he criticised the government's handling of the cyclone relief situation in interviews with the foreign media. Zarganar, an activist and a dentist by training who joined the 1988 uprising against military rule, had been previously arrested for his pro-democracy efforts. He is currently in poor health and is being denied proper medical attention.

Military Affairs Security arrested six others in mid June 2008 following their efforts to bury cyclone victims in Bogale Township in the devastated Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta in southern Myanmar. They are Dr Nay Win and his daughter Phyo Phyo Aung, Aung Kyaw San, Lin Htet Naing (aka Aung Thant Zin Oo), Phone Pyeit Kywe and Shein Yazar Tun.

They were sentenced on 10 April 2009 to prison terms ranging from two to four years.

Amnesty International also calls on the Myanmar government not to torture or otherwise ill-treat these prisoners of conscience at any time. The prison authorities should also provide them with all necessary medical treatment for any health problems that they have.