

AI Index: PRE 01/211/2008
03 August 2008

Myanmar: Twenty years on, more than 2,000 political prisoners

Twenty years after the start of pro-democracy demonstrations in Myanmar that were violently repressed, the United Nations (UN) should take stronger measures to obtain the release of U Win Tin and other prisoners of conscience detained since that day, Amnesty International said today.

The UN Secretary-General's Special Advisor, Ibrahim Gambari, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, Thomas Ojea Quintana, are visiting Myanmar this month.

On 8 August 1988 -- 8.8.88 -- demonstrations led by students calling for democracy began in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) and quickly spread to other cities, growing in number and popular support over the next six weeks. Government security forces then violently stepped in and killed an estimated 3,000 people. Thousands more were imprisoned or subjected to enforced disappearance, their fate and whereabouts unknown.

Since then, despite UN engagement on Myanmar, including through General Assembly and Human Rights Council resolutions and some 35 official missions by the Special Advisor, Special Rapporteur and their predecessors, some 2,050 political prisoners remain incarcerated in Myanmar. Around 900 people have been imprisoned in the past ten months.

"Despite countless claims by the government of Myanmar that it is moving toward allowing broader political participation, U Win Tin was detained not long after the 1988 demonstrations, and remains in prison along with thousands of others," said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar Researcher.

"Nothing speaks louder of the government's poor faith than the fact that there are more long-standing political prisoners in Myanmar now than at any other time since those protests."

"While U Win Tin is the longest-serving prisoner of conscience in Myanmar, he is far from alone", said Zawacki.

"He has been joined by thousands of others since 1988, roughly 900 in just the past ten months. The UN should no longer accept the government's hollow assurances but hold Myanmar firmly to its word."

Amnesty International calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all prisoners of conscience. In particular, it urges the UN to press for the release of the following 20 people:

- U Win Tin (male), 78, a journalist, prominent dissident and senior official in the main opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party, has been in prison since 1989. He suffers from multiple health problems, and is scheduled to be released in 2009.

- Win Htein (m), 66, a senior assistant to NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was imprisoned in 1996 for, among other offences, organizing farmers and NLD members to collect agricultural statistics. He is being held in solitary confinement and suffers from numerous health problems, including hypertension and heart disease.
- Dr. Daw May Win Myint (female), 58, an MP-elect, and Dr. Than Nyein (m), 71, a senior NLD member and MP-elect, were imprisoned in 1997 for organizing an NLD meeting. Their original sentences have been repeatedly extended since 2004 and they suffer from poor health.
- Aung Tun (m), 41, a prominent member of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (Lower Burma), was imprisoned in 1998 on a 17-year sentence for “collaborating with terrorist groups” and writing a history of the student movement in Myanmar. He suffers from severe asthma and tuberculosis, and has been held incommunicado for prolonged periods.
- Myo Min Zaw (m), 31, and Ko Aye Aung (m), 33, students, were imprisoned in 1998 for their roles in student demonstrations calling for improvements to education and for the 1990 election results to be honoured. They are serving 52-year and 45-year sentences, respectively, in very remote prisons and are suffering from health problems.
- Ma Khin Khin Leh (f), 42, a teacher, was imprisoned on a life sentence in 1999 after the authorities could not locate her politically-active husband. She suffers from an unspecified lung problem and from rheumatoid arthritis.
- Khaing Kaung San (m), 37, a political dissident working with ethnic Arakanese welfare organizations, was imprisoned in 2000 after being forcibly returned from Thailand where he sought -- and was granted -- political asylum.
- Saw Naing Naing (m), 66, an MP-elect and a former prisoner of conscience between 1990 and 1999, and Soe Han (m), 65, a lawyer, were imprisoned in 2000 for 21 years for writing a statement that urged the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Saw Naing Naing is reportedly being held with criminal prisoners on death row.
- U Khun Htun O (m), 65, the most senior political representative of the Shan ethnic minority, was imprisoned in 2005 for taking part in a private discussion of official plans for political transition. He is serving a 93-year sentence and suffers from poor health.
- Min Ko Naing (m), 45, a prominent leader of the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, a former prisoner of conscience between 1989 and 2004, and a founder of the 88 Generation Students Group, was imprisoned in August 2007 for taking part in protests. He has been denied medical care for numerous ailments.
- U Ohn Than (m), 61, an activist, was imprisoned on a life sentence in August 2007 after demonstrating in front of the US embassy in Yangon. He is being held far away from his family and is reported to be suffering from an advanced stage of cerebral malaria.
- Hla Myo Naung (m), 40, a leading member of the 88 Generation Students Group, was imprisoned in October 2007 as he emerged from hiding to seek treatment for a ruptured cornea. He is reportedly at serious risk of going blind due to a lack of proper treatment.
- Thin Thin Aye (Mie Mie) (f), 38, and Htay Kywe (m), 40, leading members of the 88 Generation Students Group, and Zaw Htet Ko Ko (m), 27, a young member of the 88 Generation Students Group, were imprisoned in October 2007 during the post-crackdown man-hunt. Mie Mie has suffered from a heart condition whilst in detention, and was denied medical attention for a period. Zaw Htet Ko Ko has been denied medical treatment for a tonsil problem.
- U Gambira (m), 29, a monk and co-founder of the All Burma Monks Alliance during the September 2007 protests, was imprisoned in November 2007 after his family members were detained as “hostages” in an attempt to force him out of hiding. He has been tortured and stripped of his robes in prison, and was transferred to solitary confinement in March 2008.
- Myo Yang Naung Thein (m), 34, a member of the 88 Generation Students Group, was imprisoned in December 2007 because of his links to activists who filmed the September 2007 protests. The lower part of his body has since become paralyzed, possibly as a result of torture during interrogation, but he has been denied specialist medical treatment for a prolonged period.

These 20 prisoners of conscience, imprisoned between 1989 and 2007, are emblematic of the continued

political repression carried out by the government of Myanmar in the 20 years since the pro-democracy demonstrations.