

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

Index: ASA 16/1574/2015
3 May 2015

Myanmar: Release media workers jailed for peaceful journalistic activities

On World Press Freedom Day, Amnesty International calls on the Myanmar authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all media workers imprisoned in connection with their peaceful journalistic activities.

At least 12 media workers in Myanmar will spend World Press Freedom Day in jail. Amnesty International considers them all prisoners of conscience, detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their right to freedom of expression and other human rights. They join a growing number of prisoners of conscience in Myanmar.

In July 2014, five media workers from the weekly *Unity* newspaper – **Lu Maw Naing, Yarzar Oo, Paing Thet Kyaw, Sithu Soe** and **Tint San** – were each sentenced to 10 years in prison with hard labour under Myanmar's Official Secrets Act, later reduced to seven years on appeal. Their arrest followed the publication in *Unity* in January 2014 of an article on an alleged secret chemical weapons factory in central Myanmar. Authorities responded by arresting the five and seizing copies of the newspaper across the country. According to state media, they were charged with "*disclosing State secrets, trespassing on the restricted area of the factory, taking photographs and the act of abetting*".

The *Unity* workers join at least seven other journalists and media workers currently behind bars who have been sentenced to imprisonment in the past year. They include five media workers from the *Bi-Midday Sun* newspaper who are each serving two years in prison for publishing false claims that opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and ethnic leaders had been elected as an interim government. In March this year, two media workers from the *Myanmar Post Weekly* were each sentenced to two months' imprisonment for criminal defamation after being accused of misrepresenting a military member of parliament's speech in a headline.

Wide-ranging political, economic and political reforms since 2011 have seen the emergence of a vibrant media environment in Myanmar. However, the authorities are undermining this environment by harassing and imprisoning journalists who dare to report on topics considered 'sensitive' by the government or military.

Amnesty International is also calling for an end to the threats, harassment and other forms of intimidation faced by journalists in Myanmar as a result of their work. This is not only

impeding their ability to undertake their important work – it has also created a chilling environment for free speech and critical voices ahead of key elections later this year.

The Myanmar authorities should also ensure that journalists and other media workers are able to peacefully exercise their right to freedom of expression and carry out their journalistic activities, including reporting on public events, such as protests and demonstrations, without fear of reprisal or arrest.

Background

The arrest, detention and imprisonment of media workers takes place in a broader context of restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly in Myanmar.

Despite a public commitment by President Thein Sein to release all prisoners of conscience by the end of 2013 as part of political reforms, scores of human rights defenders, political activists, land activists and farmers continue to be arrested, charged and imprisoned simply for the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and assembly, creating a new generation of prisoners of conscience.

The right to freedom of expression is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It includes the right “to seek, receive and impart information of all kinds”. Journalists and other media workers must be able to carry out peaceful journalistic activities including sensitive investigations without fear of reprisal or arrest.

Amnesty International calls on the Myanmar authorities to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience in Myanmar and to drop charges against all those facing prosecution simply for peacefully exercising their human rights.

The organization is also calling on Myanmar to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights at the earliest opportunity, incorporate its provisions in to domestic law, and implement them in policy and practice, as a key step in strengthening protections of the human rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in the country.