

.MYANMAR

Min Ko Naing

Student leader and prisoner of conscience

“If we want to enjoy the same rights as people in other countries, we have to be disciplined, united and brave enough to stand up to the dictators. Let’s express our sufferings and demands. Nothing is going to stop us from achieving peace and justice in our country....Our noble desires must be brought forth through peaceful means.”

Excerpts from Min Ko Naing’s speeches, 1988

Paw U Tun *alias* Min Ko Naing, Chairman of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), was arrested on 24 March 1989. He was sentenced to 20 years’ imprisonment (later commuted to 10 years under a general amnesty) for his anti-government activities. The ABFSU was formed on 28 August 1988, at the height of the mass civil disobedience campaign against 26 years of one-party military rule in Myanmar. At the founding rally of the ABFSU, Min Ko Naing called on students throughout the country to struggle peacefully against military rule and for democracy and freedom of association. The ABFSU and Buddhist monks went on to lead non-violent anti-government protests.

Paw U Tun launched his 1988 appeal for peaceful political action in the name of “Min Ko Naing”, a pseudonym he and at least 18 other students had adopted earlier to sign posters and leaflets criticizing military rule. It means “Conqueror of Kings”.

In 1988 civil unrest erupted in Myanmar (then called Burma), after the demonetization of much of the Burmese currency in 1987 by the military government of General Ne Win. The same year Myanmar was accorded Least Developed Nation status by the UN -- a resource-rich country had become one of the world’s poorest. In protest at government mismanagement of the economy, students in Yangon, the capital, began demonstrations in March 1988. Min Ko Naing soon emerged as a leader, encouraging people to use peaceful means to express their frustration.

Min Ko Naing’s interest in politics began at Yangon University in the mid-1980’s where he studied Zoology. Student Unions at that time, as now, were illegal; however he and other students formed secret study groups in anticipation of protests against the worsening economic conditions in Myanmar. According to people who knew him, Min Ko Naing was a member of a performance troupe which took part in the traditional *Than Gyat* competition during the annual Water Festival (*Thingyan*); his troupe was called “Goat-Mouth and Spirit-Eye” and apparently performed satirical plays and sketches about Myanmar’s government and the lack of democracy and freedom.

In September 1988 after violently suppressing demonstrations and killing hundreds of people, the military reasserted power and formed a new government, called

the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Martial law decrees were issued, including a ban on any criticism of the military and of any public gathering of more than five people. At the same time the SLORC announced that political parties could be formed and that elections would take place in May 1990. Dozens of political parties were founded, including the National League for Democracy (NLD, led by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi).

In March 1989, the Myanmar Government began to issue warnings against possible memorial gatherings by students and others to mark the first anniversaries of the deaths of student demonstrators during the initial waves of civil unrest in March 1988. At a 24 March 1989 press conference a SLORC spokesperson said that the ABFSU and two other student union organizations were “illegal organizations” because they had refused to register with the authorities. The spokesperson went on to say:

“Min Ko Naing, alias Paw U Tun, chairman of the illegal ABFSU, has been arrested...because he and his associates instigated disturbances to the detriment of law and order, peace and tranquillity. At the same time, it had been ascertained that they have been carrying out organizational work and giving speeches...Furthermore, Min Ko Naing has been found to have repeatedly violated Order No 2/88 [forbidding gatherings of more than five people]...Action will be taken against him according to the law.”

The spokesperson stated that another reason for his arrest was that they had learnt that “*Min Ko Naing and his associates have been carrying out activities and plans to disturb and undermine the holding of Armed Forces Day*”, an official event held annually on 27 March.

According to unofficial sources, before his arrest some of his fellow student leaders had tried to convince Min Ko Naing that he should leave Yangon and seek sanctuary with the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF) on the Thai border. The ABSDF coordinates armed activities against the regime by anti-government students. Min Ko Naing reportedly refused to join the ABSDF, saying that he would rather continue ABFSU activities such as distributing leaflets and organizing demonstrations than join the armed struggle. Other allegations made by the SLORC against him claim that he and other ABFSU leaders were “recruited” by the communist insurgent underground early in 1988. However, the stated position of Min Ko Naing and other leaders has been to pursue a course of political organization and demonstrations.

The Myanmar authorities have arrested hundreds of students for their political opposition activities. Although thousands of young activists fled to neighbouring countries after the military reasserted power in September 1988, others continued their

struggle inside the country. Most recently students staged demonstrations in December 1996 when scores of them were arrested. In the runup to the 10th anniversary of the 1988 pro-democracy movement, scores of young activists were arrested in mid-1998. Arrests of students and other young people have continued into 2000 in pre-emptive moves by the authorities - now known as the State Peace and Development Council - to eradicate any opposition to their rule.

Min Ko Naing was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment under Section 5(j) of the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act, vaguely-worded legislation which is frequently used to imprison political prisoners. His sentence was commuted to 10 years under a general amnesty in January 1993. Amnesty International believes that Min Ko Naing is a prisoner of conscience detained solely for his leadership of a student movement without having used or advocated violence. He should be released immediately and unconditionally.

Min Ko Naing was awarded the John Humphrey Freedom Award in Canada on 10 December 1999, which is Human Rights Day, the day which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the UN in 1948. In a videotaped message which was smuggled out of Myanmar, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi made these comments about Min Ko Naing:

"[Min Ko Naing] is one of the student leaders who started the 1988 movement for democracy, and he has stood firm against all pressure from the authorities...[he] represents many others who are suffering from the injustices of the present military regime. That the prize has been awarded to him gives us all great hope, great pride, and great pleasure, because it shows that the world has not forgotten our cause...."

His treatment in prison

Min Ko Naing was severely tortured and ill-treated during the early stages of his detention and his health suffered as a consequence. During his interrogation he was reportedly forced to stand in water for two weeks until he collapsed, and as a result, his left foot became totally numb. Such treatment is not uncommon. Political prisoners in Myanmar routinely face torture during the initial phases of detention when they are often interrogated for hours or even days at a time by rotating teams of Military Intelligence (MI) personnel. They are also vulnerable to torture and ill-treatment after sentencing, when they can be punished for breaking arbitrary prison rules such as possessing writing paper. In addition conditions in most prisons are harsh, due to lack of adequate food, water, sanitation, and medical care.

Torture and ill-treatment have become institutionalized in Myanmar. Patterns of torture have remained the same, although the time and place vary. Torture occurs throughout the country and has been reported for over four decades. Members of the security forces continue to use torture as a means of extracting information; to punish political prisoners and members of ethnic minorities; and as a means of instilling fear in anyone critical of the military government.

For most of his imprisonment Min Ko Naing has been held in complete solitary confinement. In 1993 he was visited in Insein Prison, Myanmar's main detention facility, by a United States Congressman. He was said to be in poor health and appeared disoriented. In November 1994 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar was also allowed to visit him briefly in prison, and described him as being nervous and thin. Subsequent reports on his health stated that, although it improved, he suffers from a nervous tremor and may have suffered emotionally as a result of his ill-treatment and prolonged solitary confinement. He is believed to suffer from a gastric ulcer.

Although Min Ko Naing should have been released in March 1999 on completion of his sentence, he is still held at Sittway Prison, Rakhine State. He was transferred there from Insein Prison, near Yangon, the capital, on an unknown date. As his family lives in Yangon, it is extremely difficult for them to visit him. Prisoners rely on their families to provide them with essential food and medication during their fortnightly visits.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Please write to the Myanmar authorities:

- *expressing concern that Min Ko Naing is a prisoner of conscience, detained solely for his leadership of a student movement without having used or advocated violence.*
- *urging the authorities to ensure that, pending his release, Min Ko Naing is provided with adequate medical care and that he is allowed access to his family.*
- *expressing concern that Min Ko Naing's health has suffered as a result of torture and ill-treatment during the early stages of his detention.*
- *expressing concern that Min Ko Naing has been held in complete solitary confinement for most of his imprisonment.*
- *expressing concern that, according to his prison sentence, Min Ko Naing should have been released in March 1999, but that he remains detained.*
- *urging the authorities to release Min Ko Naing immediately and unconditionally.*
- *urging the authorities to respect and promote the protection of fundamental human rights in Myanmar.*

Addresses:

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For more information about torture and ill-treatment in Myanmar, please see Amnesty International report - Myanmar: The Institution of Torture (ASA 16/24/00).