

PUBLIC

AI Index: ASA 16/003/2009

06 May 2009

UA 120/09 Health concern/Fear of torture or other ill-treatment/Prisoner of conscience

MYANMAR Zarganar (m), aged 48, pro-democracy activist, comedian

Popular comedian Zarganar, who has been imprisoned since June 2008 for helping survivors of Cyclone Nargis, is in urgent need of medical attention for his various health problems. He is now understood to be receiving some medication from the authorities, though it is unclear what type he is receiving. Zarganar now urgently needs proper medical treatment in a hospital, with his condition continually monitored by doctors.

He has been in Myitkyina Prison, in the northern Kachin State, since November 2008. He lost consciousness in his cell for more than two hours on 16 April, and was only taken to Myitkyina hospital 10 days later. At that time doctors found that he had high blood pressure, spondylitis (inflammation of the joints of the spine) and an enlarged heart. Blood samples were taken, and tested at a larger hospital: these showed that he has developed hyperthyroidism (overactivity of the thyroid gland, which can cause heart problems). Zarganar has had a history of high blood pressure and stomach complaints which began before he was imprisoned.

Zarganar is serving a 35-year prison sentence for leading a movement that collected money and supplies for the survivors of Cyclone Nargis, which hit Myanmar on 2-3 May 2008. He was arrested on 4 June of that year, after he criticised the government's handling of the cyclone relief situation in interviews with foreign journalists. Zarganar, who had joined the 1988 uprising against military rule, had been previously arrested for his pro-democracy efforts.

Zarganar is one of 21 people still behind bars for their independent post-cyclone relief efforts. All of them were arrested for delivering aid to the victims, for reporting on the cyclone, and even for burying the dead.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The lack of healthcare in Myanmar's prisons has damaged the health of prisoners already suffering from serious medical conditions.

At least 210 political prisoners have been moved to remote prisons since November 2008. Zarganar is currently being held over 1,400km from his family, who live in the country's main city, Yangon. It is now much more difficult for families of the 210 prisoners to visit their relatives in prison. The poor conditions and inadequate medical care mean that political prisoners often rely on family members to provide them with basic medicines, food and clothing. Many family members must undertake long journeys – in some cases up to nine days – to visit them.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- urging the authorities to ensure that Zarganar receives immediate access to any medical treatment he may require, and that this continues until he is released;
- calling on the authorities to release Zarganar immediately and unconditionally as soon as he has received the urgent medical treatment he needs;
- reminding the authorities that under international standards, everyone in custody should have access to appropriate medical care;

- calling for immediate action to ensure that while he is in detention, Zarganar is granted full access to his lawyer and family.

APPEALS TO:

Maung Oo
Minister for Home Affairs
Ministry of Home Affairs
Office No. 10
Naypyitaw, Union of Myanmar
Fax: +95 67 412 439
Salutation: Dear Minister

Brigadier-General Kyaw Hsan
Minister of Information
Ministry of Information
Bldg. (7), Naypyitaw, Union of Myanmar
Salutation: Dear Minister

Nyan Win
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Naypyitaw, Union of Myanmar
Salutation: Dear Minister

and to diplomatic representatives of Myanmar accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 17 June 2009.