

EXTERNAL

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*MEDICAL CONCERN*

**Dr Ma Thida  
Win Tin, Win Htein, Min Ko Naing**

**MYANMAR**

In November 1993 Amnesty International issued information on the arrest and imprisonment of Dr Ma Thida and other members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Myanmar's main opposition party. During a visit to Myanmar in February 1994, United States Congressman William Richardson was able to meet Ma Thida and three other political prisoners held in Insein prison in Yangon<sup>1</sup>. Although Insein is Yangon's main prison with an estimated prison population of approximately 4,800, medical facilities are extremely limited. There is a doctor in the prison; many prisoners are without proper medical attention and the prison infirmary is said to be extremely poorly equipped. Medicines are provided by the prisoners' families and it is reported that these medicines do not always reach the prisoners.

In addition to the lack of medical care, general conditions in Insein prison are poor, often amounting to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Amnesty International is particularly concerned in this instance that the four prisoners named here are being held in solitary confinement in dimly-lit cells. Some have been held in solitary confinement for a period of years and all have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Three are NLD members and the fourth is chairman of the All-Burma Federation of Student Unions.

**Dr Ma Thida** is a 27-year-old hospital doctor and well-known writer who was arrested in August 1993 and sentenced in October to 20 years' imprisonment. She is a prominent political activist who was arrested solely for her activities within the NLD, a party which was established during the 1988 pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. In 1988/89 she was the campaign assistant to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, co-founder of the NLD, who was arrested in 1989 and has since been under house arrest. At the time of the pro-democracy movement Ma Thida was one of a number of doctors who treated students and others injured in the demonstrations. She has been adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International.

Dr Ma Thida is held in solitary confinement in a cell with little light and without access to reading matter. She has said that she suffers from a gastric ulcer and from endometriosis. Ma Thida has suffered weight loss during her imprisonment and is reported to be very weak and thin.

**Win Tin** is a former journalist and editor who is now in his fifth year of imprisonment. He was a senior member of the Central Executive Committee of the NLD, and was active in opposition

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<sup>1</sup>Formerly Rangoon. Burma changed its name to Myanmar in June 1989 when the English spelling of the names of several cities and regions was also changed.

politics at the time of his arrest in 1989. He was initially sentenced to three years' imprisonment on charges of "harbouring an offender", charges which are believed to have been politically motivated, but was subsequently sentenced to a further 11 years' imprisonment. Amnesty International believes that he was arrested solely on account of his peaceful political activities and considers him to be a prisoner of conscience.

Win Tin is aged 64 and suffers from spondylitis; he wears a neck brace which appears to be ill-fitting and to cause him discomfort. Although he wears glasses, it appears that he has an uncorrected squint in one eye and has difficulty in focusing. He has also lost several teeth and is in need of dental treatment. Win Tin is totally dependent on what medicines his family can provide and is also dependent upon them for dietary supplements. He is believed to have received very little medical care during his five years in prison and is said to be in urgent need of medical attention. (There had been previous reports in 1992 that Win Tin was in need of surgery and that requests for transfer to hospital were refused by the authorities. Amnesty International, however, has no further details of this.)

**Win Htein** is a former army captain in his late forties who is serving a seven year prison sentence. He is a business consultant who, at the time of his arrest in July 1989, was in charge of the headquarters office of the NLD. He is reported to suffer from hypertension and complains of headaches and sweating. Amnesty International has adopted him as a prisoner of conscience.

**Min Ko Naing:** was arrested in March 1989 when he was chairman of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU). The ABFSU was at the forefront of the civil unrest and anti-government protests which took place in Myanmar in 1988. Min Ko Naing has been sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment and Amnesty International believes that he may be a prisoner of conscience, arrested solely for peaceful anti-government activities.

He is reported to have been tortured and ill-treated during the early stages of his detention and is now in a poor state of health. During an earlier visit of US Congressman Richardson in 1993, he was reported to be in poor health and appeared to be disoriented. Although his health now seems to have improved slightly, he has a nervous tremor and has apparently suffered emotionally as a result of his ill-treatment and subsequent solitary confinement. He is without access to reading matter.

Amnesty International is seriously concerned about the lack of medical care, the use of prolonged solitary confinement, which must be considered to constitute cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and the poor general conditions in Insein and other prisons in Myanmar. Lack of medical attention and treatment has in some instances resulted in death. Tin Maung Win, an NLD member of parliament-elect died in Insein Prison in January 1991 as a result of untreated stomach problems and, more recently, in October 1993 a prisoner in Thayet prison died of unknown causes, but without access to medical care.

Amnesty International is calling on the authorities to end the solitary confinement of these four prisoners immediately and to provide urgent medical attention and care.

## **Background**

Widespread civil unrest emerged in Myanmar (then Burma) in March 1988 with mass demonstrations calling for an end to 26 years of one-party military rule. The demonstrations continued over a period of several months until, on 18 September 1988, the pro-democracy uprising was violently suppressed by the army which reasserted military control and formed a

new ruling body known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). It is during this period that the NLD was formed.

The SLORC subsequently allowed political parties to register and promised elections, but at the same time it began to arrest thousands of opposition party members, culminating in a series of mass arrests in mid-1989. The promised elections took place in May 1990 and the NLD gained over 80% of parliamentary seats, although many of its leaders were imprisoned at the time. However, the SLORC has ignored the results of the election and continues to retain power. It has ruled by decree, issuing martial law orders to impose restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression and assembly. These decrees have been used to arbitrarily detain those perceived as a political threat. Although large-scale releases took place in 1992 and 1993, hundreds of political prisoners remain in detention and Dr Ma Thida's arrest was one of dozens of recent arrests to have taken place in an apparent attempt to stem continuing criticism of the government.

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To: Medical professionals  
From: Medical Office / Research Department - Asia  
Date: 21 April 1994

*MEDICAL LETTER WRITING ACTION*

**Ma Thida,  
Win Tin, Win Htein, Min Ko Naing**

**MYANMAR**

Keywords

Theme: POCs/prolonged solitary confinement/ill-health/medical care/prison conditions

Profession/association: Doctor

**Summary**

The four prisoners named above are all held in long-term solitary confinement and are reported to be in need of medical attention. Dr Ma Thida, Win Tin and Win Htein are members of the National League for Democracy, Myanmar's main opposition party, and Min Ko Naing was chairman of the All-Burma Federation of Student Unions. Please see the details attached.

**Recommended Actions**

Letters are requested from medical professionals to the addresses below:

- expressing grave concern at the long-term solitary confinement of Dr Ma Thida, Win Tin, Win Htein and Min Ko Naing and urging that their isolation be ended without delay
- further expressing concern that all are reported to be in need of immediate medical attention and that medical facilities in Insein prison are very basic and conditions poor
- calling for urgent steps to ensure that they are provided with proper medical attention and any treatment they may require
- noting that all appear to have been arrested for the exercise of their right to freedom of expression and urging their release from prison
- calling on the authorities to ensure the release of all political prisoners arrested for the peaceful expression of opinion

**Addresses**

General Than Shwe  
Chairman  
State Law & Order Restoration Council  
Yangon  
Union of Myanmar

Lieutenant General Khin Nyunt  
Secretary 1  
State Law & Order Restoration Council  
Yangon  
Union of Myanmar

Vice Admiral Than Nyunt  
Minister of Health  
Ministers' Office  
Yangon  
Union of Myanmar

U Zaw Min  
Director General  
Corrections Department  
Ministry of Home Affairs  
Ministers' Office  
Yangon  
Union of Myanmar