

Embargoed for : 24/05/2000 17:00 GMT

### *Unsung heroines: the women of Myanmar*

*Since the military's violent suppression of the 1988 pro-democracy movement, the women of Myanmar have been arrested, tortured, and subjected to forced labour and relocations, Amnesty International said today in a new report.*

*"Already struggling to feed their families and educate their children, women in Myanmar also face human rights violations on a massive scale," the organization said.*

*Because they play an important role in opposition politics, women are at risk of imprisonment, harassment, and surveillance, just as much as men. Almost 100 women are known to be imprisoned for political reasons, many of whom are in bad health due to extremely poor prison conditions and lack of medical care. Amnesty International has detailed information on 61 of them, including several prisoners of conscience.*

*Several women were among scores of people arrested in April in an ongoing crackdown by the military government, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), against the political opposition. This is widely seen as a pre-emptive move by the SPDC in the run-up to the National League for Democracy's (NLD, Myanmar's opposition party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi) 10th anniversary election victory on 27th May.*

*Young women who are part of banned student unions are also routinely arrested and deprived of their liberty, often in the context of peaceful protest demonstrations. Moe Kalayar Oo, a university science student in her early 30s, was arrested in 1995 for participating in a*

funeral eulogy of former Prime Minister U Nu and sentenced to seven years= imprisonment. She is in poor health at Tharawaddy Prison, central Myanmar.

Women from ethnic minority groups are subject to a different kind of persecution. Various ethnic minority armed opposition groups have been fighting the military for over 50 years, but it is the civilians, mostly women and children, who have suffered the greatest casualties.

When the military embarked on a series of infrastructure projects in the early 1990s, women and children were forced into labour and subjected to ill-treatment.

A 15-year-old girl belonging to the Karenni ethnic minority told Amnesty International that she was forced to work on roads by the military for two years until she fled to Thailand. An orphan who was living with relatives, she said she would like to go to school again.

A young Shan woman reported that she was forced to act as a porter for the military in December 1999. After she slowed down because of her heavy burden, she was kicked on the legs and buttocks and threatened with a knife by soldiers.

When the army began massive relocation programs in 1996 as part of its counter-insurgency campaigns, tens of thousands of women belonging to ethnic minorities were forcibly relocated from their ancestral lands by the military, without compensation.

Some women fled to Thailand, some went to military-designated relocation sites, and still others hid in the jungle. A Karenni woman told Amnesty International:

*ALife in the hiding place was full of miseries...I don=t understand why the Burmese did this. We didn=t do anything against them, and we just lived our simple and traditional lives. We were dying because we had no food in hiding.@*

*Due to widespread human rights violations and poor economic conditions, women from all ethnic groups often become refugees and migrant workers in Thailand, India, and Bangladesh. Many of these women are lured or trapped into prostitution where they are at a high risk of HIV infection.*

*Amnesty International calls on the Myanmar government to release all female prisoners of conscience immediately and unconditionally. The organization also calls on the authorities to abolish forced labour and provide human rights training to all military personnel, police, and prison staff, with a special emphasis on women's rights.*

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London,  
UK, on +44 20 7413 5566  
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW