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MYANMAR: THOUSAND OF PEOPLE VICTIMS OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Human rights violations are now so widespread in Myanmar (Burma) that many thousands of people, from every walk of life, have already fallen victim, Amnesty International said today.

People have been killed, tortured and arrested in every region, even where there is no armed opposition to the government, said the organization. "Tens of thousands have been forced to serve the military as porters in war zones or as labourers on construction projects. Many have been severely ill-treated or summarily killed by the army. People of all the country's ethnic groups have suffered, as have members of each of its religious groups, the majority Buddhist as well as minority Muslim, Christian and Hindu communities. More than 300,000 people have fled the country in the last 18 months."

At particular risk is anyone who opposes the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Many leaders and rank and file members of opposition parties have been arrested or threatened - including Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the National League for Democracy and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, who has been under house arrest since 1989.

Her party won a landslide victory in the elections of 1990 - but the SLORC held on to power and stepped up its campaign of intimidation and arrests. Although since April over 500 political prisoners have been released, Amnesty International believes at least 1600 more may remain detained in Myanmar. These include students, artists, monks and even children - one 14-year-old boy was sentenced to 13 years in prison for putting up posters in his school.

Military tribunals created in July 1989 were abolished last month, but the country continues to be ruled under Martial Law and prisoners sentenced by these unfair courts remain imprisoned.

Many prisoners have been tortured, sometimes severely. Torture is routine at the hands of the army, police and military intelligence and Amnesty International knows of at least 20 torture centres. Prisoners have been deprived of food, sleep and water; they have been beaten and been given electric shocks; they have been forced to "ride the motorcycle" - stand with arms outstretched and legs bent for long periods; sometimes torture may have caused prisoners' deaths.

In areas where there is armed opposition to the government virtually everyone is at risk from the army. Whole areas have been cleared by the military, making thousands of people homeless. In March this year, for example, people from 57 villages were forced to abandon their homes and were warned that anyone staying behind would be "wiped out". Within three months 8000 people had moved, homes had been destroyed and thousands of people had been detained in poor conditions in camps by the army. "Human rights violations in Myanmar are deep rooted and thousands upon thousands have already suffered," said Amnesty International. "In ethnic minority areas, especially where there is armed conflict, anyone may be arrested, forced to work for the army or even killed. Elsewhere, anyone who expresses any opposition to the SLORC is similarly at risk.

"The pattern of abuse is entrenched throughout the country. It needs to be tackled urgently and seriously if there is to be an end to the bloodshed and imprisonment. The government has taken only a few steps so far and there has been no real change - now it's time for them to take real action to end this appalling situation."

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