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SINGAPORE: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS IMPRISONMENT OF
JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

Amnesty International is calling for the immediate and unconditional release of 18 men and women sent to prison yesterday simply for being Jehovah's Witnesses, a religious groups that has been illegal in Singapore since 1972.

"The Jehovah's Witnesses should be allowed to meet and practise their religion peacefully without threat of arrest or imprisonment. Freedom of religion is a fundamental right which is guaranteed by the Constitution of Singapore," Amnesty International said today.

"All 18 are prisoners of conscience and should never have been tried in the first place."

The group of 11 women and seven men -- all Singaporeans aged between 19 and 50 -- were found guilty on Friday 17 November of membership of an illegal society. All were sentenced to fines and given until Tuesday 21 November to pay. After choosing not to pay the fines on the grounds of conscience they were taken into custody and are now serving prison sentences of between one week and four weeks. They have appealed against their sentences but have been refused bail. It is not clear at this stage whether their appeals will be allowed.

The group include husband and wife, Raman and Selva Nair, who were also found guilty of allowing their home to be used for religious meetings. The couple, together with other members of the group, are also facing further charges of possession of banned religious literature, which carries a maximum jail term of one year. Five other Jehovah's Witnesses who were also convicted on Friday escaped prison sentences when they agreed to pay their fines.

Amnesty International is also calling on the authorities to drop similar charges against another group of Jehovah's Witnesses whose trial began this week. Two more trials are also scheduled to take place later in November and December.

Those convicted and facing trials are among 69 Jehovah's Witnesses arrested during police raids on four homes in February this year. During initial detention and interrogation the Jehovah's Witnesses allege that they were deprived of sleep and denied access to legal representatives. A number of teenagers in the group were not permitted to inform their parents of their whereabouts. Those arrested included four foreign nationals who were subsequently released without charge and expelled from the country.

"These trials bring to mind the plight of another 36 Jehovah's Witnesses already serving prison terms for refusing to perform military service because it conflicts with their religious beliefs," Amnesty International said. "They are also prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately."

In Singapore there is no recognition of conscientious objection and no alternative form of civilian service. Young men who refuse to comply with military orders are court-martialled and sentenced to an initial 12 or 15 months' detention in military barracks. A second refusal to comply results in a further two years in detention. More than 100 conscientious objectors are believed to have been detained and court-martialled since 1973.

"Everyone should have the right to refuse to perform armed service for reasons of conscience or profound conviction arising from religious, ethical, moral, humanitarian, philosophical, political or similar motives," Amnesty International said.

In August the organization wrote to the Minister of Defence calling on him to release all of those held for the peaceful expression of their conscientiously-held beliefs and to introduce a civilian alternative service for conscientious objectors. No reply has been received.

BACKGROUND

Jehovah's Witnesses have practised their religion in Singapore since the 1940s. The Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses was officially recognized under the Societies Act in 1962. However, legal recognition ended in 1972 when the Singapore government deregistered the Congregation on the grounds that the group's existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order in Singapore. Under the Undesirable Publications Act all literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses Watch Tower Society was also banned and meeting to study the bible or carrying the bible printed by the Watch Tower Society became an offence. However, the real reason for the ban is thought likely to be because male Jehovah's Witnesses refuse on religious grounds to perform compulsory military service.

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