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MYANMAR/BURMA: INTERNATIONAL CALL FOR SOLIDARITY WITH IMPRISONED POLITICIANS

On the fifth anniversary of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest, Amnesty International is holding an international day of solidarity for her and for the 26 members of parliament-elect held as political prisoners in Myanmar.

Politicians and members of Amnesty International are staging events in at least 20 countries around the world, including Japan, Israel, France and the USA, appealing to the ruling military in Myanmar for their release.

"Myanmar's ruling military council has for the last five years persistently denied its citizens some of the most basic human rights," Amnesty International said, "with thousands of people being forced to porter for the army and hundreds of political prisoners, including more than 58 prisoners of conscience, remaining in detention."

The ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to hand over power in May 1990 despite an overwhelming victory by the National League for Democracy (NLD), founded by Aung San Suu Kyi, in the first democratic elections in Myanmar in recent years. They have retained a repressive control over the country ever since.

In February this year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Myanmar reported that human rights are widely violated and ignored by SLORC, especially in connection with forced labour, forced relocation and political activities.

Amnesty International's action focuses on two of the 26 democratically-elected NLD parliamentarians held as prisoners of conscience in Myanmar: U Kyi Maung, arrested in September 1990 and Dr Aung Khin Sint, arrested in August 1993.

The two men have both been sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment purely for their peaceful opposition to the government and remain held at Insein Prison, Yangon (Rangoon). U Kyi Maung, in his seventies, is reported to be suffering from poor health and not receiving the medical treatment he needs.

The practice of forcible portering -- arbitrarily seizing civilians to carry ammunition and other supplies for the army -- is common in areas where armed opposition groups are active.

"SLORC troops routinely beat and kick porters who have become weak and unable to carry heavy loads of ammunition," Amnesty International said. "The porters are rarely told how long they will be forced to serve, are typically given little or nothing to eat, and are sometimes tortured or killed."

Despite SLORC's statement at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in July last year that ethnic minorities in Myanmar's border areas now "enjoy fully their political and civil rights", the most recent reports of forcible portering come from Shan State on the Thai border. Troops have been seizing civilians in the Tachilek area since 18 May, resulting in hundreds of Shan and other civilians fleeing across the border to Thailand.

Others have been arbitrarily seized by the military and forced to work on construction projects. Amnesty International has spoken to victims who were not told how long they would be away from home, were not provided with food and shelter or any medical treatment and were subjected to beatings and other ill-treatment. Since November last year, members of the Mon ethnic minority have been forced to work under such conditions building the railway line from Dawei to Ye in the Mon State.

Amnesty International has welcomed some improvements which SLORC has made relating to human rights in Myanmar, including the release of over 2000 political prisoners since April 1992.

"These concessions do not however represent a fundamental change in the SLORC's repressive policy and practice on human rights," said Amnesty International.

"The solidarity shown today by ordinary people all over the world for victims of human rights violations in Myanmar must tell SLORC that it is time for change."

Events are being held in cities in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Italy, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Japan, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, UK and USA. For further information contact national Amnesty International offices in those countries or Amnesty International's International Secretariat in London, UK. Tel: +44 71 413 5810.

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