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Myanmar prisoners kept in ‘dog cells’ after protests

The Myanmar authorities must stop forcing prisoners into cells designed for military dogs, Amnesty International said today, after it emerged that the practice is being used as punishment against hunger striking activists.

Seven prisoners, including two Buddhist monks who went on hunger strike at Insein prison in the main city of Yangon, were placed in solitary confinement between 24 and 26 May, in the cells, Amnesty International has learned.

“The shocking accounts of the cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment prisoners in Insein prison are being subjected to is yet another example of the utter disregard for the most basic human rights by authorities in Myanmar,” said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International’s Myanmar researcher.

“Authorities in Myanmar must immediately stop any ill-treatment of prisoners. Any official suspected of being responsible for such offences must be suspended and prosecuted”, he added.

One political prisoner who was held in a dog cell in the past at Insein reported that the space was covered in white lice and smelt like a sewer. Others have reported that they were periodically denied food and water whilst in the cell.

At least three female political prisoners started the hunger strike on 17 May at Insein prison, in protest against a government decision to reduce all prison sentences by only one year.

They were joined on 22 May by 22 other political prisoners who started a protest about prison conditions.

On 24 May, hunger strikers Aung Kyaw Soe, Nyi Nyi Tun, Nyan Lin Tun, Soe Moe Tun, Zaw Tun Naing and two Buddhist monks, U Vithoddi (aka Wunna Htay) and U Yayvata (aka Ye Min Naung), were placed in dog cells.

They were returned to their usual cells on 26 May. Officials reportedly started talks with the protesters around 27 May, but when the talks broke down, those political prisoners who decided to continue the hunger strike were again placed in the dog cells.

The dog cells are about 10 feet in length and seven feet wide, windowless and soundproof. There is no proper sanitation, no bed and no mats on the floor.

In a separate development, a number of political prisoners at Kale prison in the north of the country have signed a petition calling for improvements to prison conditions. Among the signatories is the monk and human rights activist U Gambira, currently serving a 68-year sentence for his role in pro-reform demonstrations in August and September 2007.

The petition, sent to President Thein Sein and the UN Human Rights Council, stated that all the signatories would go on hunger strike if their demands were not met by 31 May.

On 16 May the Myanmar government announced that all current prison sentences were being reduced by one year. However, at least 2,200 political prisoners remain behind bars.