

Eighteen years of persecution in Myanmar

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On 24 October 2007, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will have spent 12 of the last 18 years under detention. She may be the best known of Myanmar's prisoners of conscience, but she is far from the only one.

Amnesty International believes that, even before the recent violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, there were more than 1,150 political prisoners in the country. Prisoners of conscience among these include senior political representatives of the ethnic minorities as well as members of the NLD and student activist groups.

To mark the 18th year of Aung San Suu Kyi's persecution by the Myanmar, Amnesty International seeks to draw the world's attention to four people who symbolise all those in detention and suffering persecution in Myanmar. These include Aung San Suu Kyi herself; U Win Tin, Myanmar's longest-serving prisoner of conscience; U Khun Htun Oo, who is serving a 93 year sentence; and Zaw Htet Ko Ko, who was arrested after participating in the recent demonstrations in the country.

Read more about these four people:

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's party won the general elections in Myanmar in 1990. But, instead of taking her position as national leader, she was kept under house arrest by the military authorities and remains so today.

At 62, Aung San Suu Kyi is the General Secretary and a co-founder of Myanmar's main opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). She was put under house arrest for the first time in July 1989 following the brutal crackdown of the 1988 pro-democracy protests. A year later, her party won the elections by an overwhelming majority. But the military rulers declared the results null and void and continued to deny Aung San Suu Kyi her freedom.

Aung San Suu Kyi is generally not allowed any visitors, and is held in increasing isolation and permitted only infrequent visits by her doctor. Her current detention order expires on May 27 2008.

She has been detained on and off on since 1989, with extended periods of unofficial detention, house arrest under administrative detention laws and restrictions on her movement. She has most recently been detained since 30 May 2003, after a violent attack on her and other party members during a trip through upper Myanmar. The attack is believed to have been carried out with the involvement of the state and state sponsored civil organizations and still has not been independently investigated.

Aung San Suu Kyi and her entourage were stopped on the road at night between villages near Depeyin in a remote part of Sagaing Division. They were set upon in a violent coordinated attack. Men with sharpened bamboo sticks, iron rods and stones, attacked vehicles, pulling individuals out of cars and beating them repeatedly on the head and body.

NLD Youth members and others attempted to protect the leaders, including Aung San Suu Kyi and her deputy U Tin Oo. At least four persons were killed, and scores more seriously injured. Aung San Suu Kyi and her security detail escaped, but they were soon taken into detention and held incommunicado.

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After the attack, the authorities stated that Aung San Suu Kyi was being held in protective custody and that measures against the detained leaders would be lifted as the situation normalized. They promised in July 2003 that she would be released "when the time comes" and that they were waiting for a "cool down" and in August 2003 urged "let us not call it detention... We don't have any kind of intention of animosity against Aung San Suu Kyi. That is why we have not taken any legal action against her and her party".

After being held incommunicado in a military camp, Aung San Suu Kyi was transferred to her house in September 2003 and held under de facto house arrest. In November 2003, the authorities handed down a one-year detention order under an administrative detention law that has been regularly extended since.

Aung San Suu Kyi was previously held under house arrest on account of her prominent role in opposition politics between 1989 and 1995, and 2000 to 2002. During her time in house arrest, the authorities twice amended the legislation under which she is held to allow for a longer period of detention without charge or trial.

Even when she was not under official house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi still had her freedom of movement heavily restricted: the authorities blockaded roads, often arrested those seeking to meet her and denied family members, including her critically ill husband, permission to visit the country to see her.

U Win Tin

U Win Tin, 77, has already spent the past 18 years in jail on account of his peaceful opposition to the Myanmar military authorities and his acts in defence of human rights and freedom of expression. He is Myanmar's longest serving prisoner of conscience.

A journalist, former editor and senior opposition party official, U Win Tin was arrested in July 1989 in a crackdown on political party members. He is believed to have been arrested because of his senior position with the National League for Democracy (NLD), the main opposition party in Myanmar, which won 82% of seats in general elections in 1990, but to whom the military authorities did not hand over power.

Detained since 1989, U Win Tin has been sentenced three times to a total of 20 years' imprisonment. U Win Tin was most recently sentenced in March 1996 to seven years' imprisonment for communicating with the United Nations while in jail about prison conditions and for writing and circulating articles in prison. Authorities characterized this as "secretly publishing propaganda to incite riots in jail."

The letter to the United Nations was reported to have been titled "The testimonials of prisoners of conscience from Insein Prison who have been Unjustly Imprisoned, Demands and Requests regarding Human Rights Violations in Burma" and detailed a lack of medical treatment and torture in prison. While authorities investigated the incident, U Win Tin and others were ill-treated. He was held in a cell designed for military dogs, without bedding and deprived of food and water and family visits for long periods.

U Win Tin has suffered from spondylitis and heart disease in prison. His health is believed to have suffered under the poor conditions in which he has been held. He has also spent much of his imprisonment in solitary confinement.

In July 2005, the authorities were reported to have told U Win Tin that he would be released with more than 200 political prisoners, but then returned him to his prison cell.

He is held in Insein Prison in Yangon, Myanmar's main city. His sentence expires in July 2009, but he is already eligible for release with time off for good behaviour.

U Khun Htun Oo

U Khun Htun Oo, 64, is an elected parliamentarian and is the most senior political representative of the Shan, the largest of Myanmar's ethnic minorities. He is serving a 93-year prison sentence for taking part in a private discussion of official plans for political transition. He is being held in one of the most remote prisons in Myanmar.

He is chairman of the opposition group the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy and had taken part in a private meeting of senior political representatives to discuss the authorities' plans for political transition over a meal. The meeting took place in Taunggyi, the capital of Shan State, on 7 February 2005 which was Shan National Day.

At the meeting, Shan political representatives were reported to have given members of ceasefire groups political advice on attending the National Convention, which was the first stage of the authorities' plans for political transition. The National Convention excluded many important political groups and was conducted with legislation criminalizing criticism of the process.

At the time, some ceasefire groups were expressing dissatisfaction that their concerns were not being discussed, including about the National Convention's sixth objective, which is to guarantee the future participation of the military in the state.

The authorities soon arrested the leaders present at the meal and denied them access to family members, in some cases for up to nine months. They were not allowed lawyers of their choice, and were sentenced to extraordinarily lengthy prison terms in November 2005.

U Khun Htun Oo was sentenced under multiple charges, reports say these included Law 5/96, which stipulates imprisonment for up to 20 years for anyone who is found guilty of expressing opinions that disrupt the stability of the state or "undermine, belittle and make people misunderstand the functions being carried out by the National Convention."

Amnesty International has called for repeal of this law, on the basis that it criminalizes the right to freedom of expression as proclaimed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

After they were sentenced, they were sent to prisons very far from their homes, without official notification to their families. U Khun Htun Oo is being held in Puta-O Prison in Kachin state in the north of Myanmar where conditions are reported to be very harsh.

Khun Htun Oo is also a member of the Committee Representing the People's Parliament, a coalition of MPs elect from the 1990 elections.

Zaw Htet Ko Ko

"Ko Ko never believes in violence. He believes in fighting for human rights in a non-violent way. I'm very proud of my son." - U Aung Myint, father of Zaw Htet Ko Ko, speaking to Amnesty International shortly after his son's arrest on 13 October.

Zaw Htet Ko Ko is a young member of the 1988 Generation Students Group. The 26-year-old father of one was arrested along with five other individuals on 13 October in a continuing crackdown by the military authorities. Amnesty International has no information on where they are being detained, but is seriously concerned for their safety as they are at grave risk of torture and ill-treatment.

Zaw Htet Ko Ko, Htay Kywe, Mie Mie, Aung Thu, and Aung Gyi and were involved in the early protest marches in August, but were soon forced into hiding as the authorities launched a

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manhunt for those they perceived as the leaders of the protests. On 21 August, 13 key activists of the 88 Generation Students group were arrested in an overnight operation.

During August and September, the authorities were reported to have raided Zaw Htet Ko Ko's home up to five times and repeatedly threatened and harassed his family in Yangon...

According to his father, U Aung Myint, Zaw Htet Ko Ko has a quiet demeanor and has always been interested in human rights.

"Ko Ko is low-profile, he stays in the background. I've never really talked to him about politics because I've had bad experiences about politics. However, my son is very interested in politics and human rights. I used to send him e-books on these subjects and he'd in turn share the books with his friends."

Working against heavy censorship of all forms of information flow in Myanmar, Zaw Htet Ko Ko was an internet enthusiast, keen to access world news and to communicate with the outside world about what was happening in his country.

U Aung Myint, a refugee who has settled in the Netherlands after leaving Myanmar in the aftermath of the brutal crackdown on the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations, recalled once asking Zaw Htet Ko Ko whether he had considered the consequences of his activism.

The answer from his son was as absolute as it was brave: "Yes, I've considered everything, about dangers. If I don't do what I'm doing, who will do it for the Burmese people?"

U Aung Myint is now very worried his son's situation in detention. "I've told him to take care of himself, to be prudent, but I think he's being tortured."