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Myanmar: End repression of ethnic minorities before elections

Myanmar's government must halt its repression of ethnic minority activists before forthcoming national and local elections, Amnesty International warned in a major report released today.

The 58-page report, *The Repression of ethnic minority activists in Myanmar*, draws on accounts from more than 700 activists from the seven largest ethnic minorities, including the Rakhine, Shan, Kachin, and Chin, covering a two-year period from August 2007.

The authorities have arrested, imprisoned, and in some cases tortured or even killed ethnic minority activists. Minority groups have also faced extensive surveillance, harassment and discrimination when trying to carry out their legitimate activities.

"Ethnic minorities play an important but seldom acknowledged role in Myanmar's political opposition," said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar expert. "The government has responded to this activism in a heavy-handed manner, raising fears that repression will intensify before the elections."

Many activists told Amnesty International that they faced repression as part of a larger movement, as in Rakhine and Kachin States during the 2007 Buddhist monk-led 'Saffron Revolution'. Witnesses described the killings and torture of monks and others by the security forces during its violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations in those states.

Others said they were pursued for specific actions, such as organizing an anti-dam signature campaign in Kachin State.

Even relatively simple expressions of political dissent were met with punishment as when Karenni youths were detained for floating small boats on a river with "No" (to the 2008 draft Constitution) written on them.

"Activism in Myanmar is not confined to the central regions and urban centres. Any resolution of the country's deeply troubling human rights record has to take into account the rights and aspirations of the country's large population of ethnic minorities," said Benjamin Zawacki.

More than 2,100 political prisoners, including many from ethnic minorities, languish in Myanmar's jails in deplorable conditions. Most are prisoners of conscience who have expressed their beliefs peacefully.

Amnesty International urged the government to lift restrictions on freedom of association, assembly, and religion in the run-up to the elections; to release immediately and unconditionally all prisoners of conscience; and to remove restrictions on independent media to cover the campaigning and election process.

Amnesty International called on Myanmar's neighbours in the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as China, Myanmar's biggest international supporter, to push the government to ensure that the people of Myanmar will be able to freely express their opinions, gather peacefully, and participate openly in the political process.

"The government of Myanmar should use the elections as an opportunity to improve its human rights record, not as a spur to increase repression of dissenting voices, especially those from the ethnic minorities," said Benjamin Zawacki.

Background

In 2010, Myanmar will hold its first national and local elections in two decades.

In 1990, two years after mostly peaceful anti-government protests resulted in the deaths of at least 3,000 demonstrators, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and a coalition of ethnic minority parties resoundingly won national elections.

The military government ignored the results, however, and continued their long-standing campaign against the political opposition.

Myanmar's most well-known human rights defender, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the NLD, has been under some form of detention for over 15 of the last 20 years.

In 2007, monks from ethnic minority Rakhine State initiated country-wide demonstrations against the government's economic and political policies, in what has become known as the Saffron Revolution.

In May 2008, a week after Cyclone Nargis devastated the country, the government insisted on holding a referendum on the draft constitution. The official results were that 99% of the electorate had gone to the polls, 92.4% of whom had voted in favour. While the 2008 Constitution potentially allows for greater representation in local government, it ensures that the military will continue to dominate the national government.

Ethnic minorities constitute some 35-40 percent of the country's population, and form the majority in the seven ethnic minority states. Each of the country's largest seven ethnic minorities has engaged in armed insurgencies against the government, some of which continue to date.

Amnesty International has documented serious human rights violations and crimes against humanity by the government in the context of the Myanmar army's campaigns against ethnic minority insurgent groups and civilians.