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Myanmar: Limited human rights improvements -- serious concerns persist

Almost two months after its first-ever visit to Myanmar, Amnesty International welcomed some limited improvements in the human rights situation, but at the same time expressed disappointment that other urgent steps have not yet been taken by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the military government. The SPDC has told the organization that political prisoners now have access to reading materials and social contact, which are positive developments. However over 1200 political prisoners are still held in prisons throughout the country, and the pace of releases has decreased considerably in the last four months.

"We welcome our ongoing dialogue with the SPDC and look forward to future visits to Myanmar, when we will investigate the human rights situation further. However we are disappointed that the SPDC has not released prisoners who are ill, elderly, or are imprisoned with their young children," Amnesty International said today.

"During our visit, we submitted a number of lists of political prisoners, whose releases should be a first priority for the SPDC. Yet to our knowledge none of these people have been released," the organization added.

People on the lists include imprisoned members of parliament-elect; people who should be released on humanitarian grounds; and those held under the administrative detention provisions of the 1975 State Protection Act.

Among those whom Amnesty International asked to be released as a matter of urgency is U Htwe Myint, a 73-year-old prisoner of conscience with multiple health problems; and Ma San San Maw, a prisoner of conscience held at Insein Prison with her 19 month old child.

At the time of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's release in May 2002 the SPDC publicly renewed its commitment to release political prisoners. They had begun to release political prisoners in January 2001, and hundreds have subsequently been freed, including a group freed in mid March 2003.

However many of them were not released unconditionally, and since July 2002 arrests of people for their peaceful political activities have begun again. Amnesty International has recently submitted a list of 27 such people to the SPDC, and is seeking further information about them.

At this time Amnesty International renews its call for the SPDC to release all prisoners of

conscience immediately and unconditionally.

Background

Amnesty International's first ever visit to Myanmar took place from 30 January until 8 February 2003. After the trip, the organization publicly welcomed the SPDC's cooperation in facilitating the visit, and the open and cordial discussions between government officials and AI.

The SPDC has taken a number of positive steps in the last three years. These include permission for an International Labour Organization (ILO) presence in Myanmar to work with the SPDC on the elimination of forced labour of civilians by the military. Amnesty International has also noted an improvement in prison conditions during this period.

The SPDC has permitted Professor Paulo Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur for Myanmar, to visit the country five times to investigate the human rights situation. He has recently concluded a mission there, and addressed the UN Human Rights Commission on 31 March. Ambassador Ismail Razali, the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Myanmar, has also travelled to the country several times a year, although he has not visited since November 2002. Amnesty International hopes to return to the country before the end of 2003.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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