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Malaysia: Prisoners of conscience released

Three prisoners of conscience were released from detention under Malaysia's draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) yesterday. A fourth detainee also saw the end of his detention order under the ISA but remains in prison on other charges.

Saari Sungib walked free, while Tian Chua and Hishamuddin Rais were transferred and are being held pending bail on pre-existing charges mostly relating to unlawful assembly. Mohd Ezam Nor is currently serving a two-year sentence for a conviction under the Official Secrets Act. All four were arrested in April 2001 on what Amnesty International believes were politically-motivated charges related to their vocal criticism of the government.

Amnesty International welcomed the releases and applauded the courage and determination shown by the detainees and their friends and family. Members of Amnesty International all over the world, as well as Malaysian activists and global solidarity groups, have campaigned for the release of these four men since their arrest more than two years ago.

"Although we welcome these releases it must be emphasised that any detention under the current ISA is illegitimate. These four men have spent more than two years in detention and separated from their families without ever having been tried in a court of law," Amnesty International said.

The organization also expressed concern that the charges under which Tian Chua, Hishamuddin Rais and Mohd Ezam Nor are currently being held have been selectively applied and are related to the exercise of freedom of expression and association. Amnesty International called for the release of Lokman Adam and Badrulamin Bahron who were arrested in April 2001 on similar charges and whose two-year detention order expires on 12 June 2003.

"The ISA must be repealed or amended so as to respect fundamental rights and freedoms including the right to peaceful freedom of expression, association and assembly, and the right to a fair and public trial," Amnesty International said.

The ISA is an unfortunate example of what can happen when states promote security at the expense of human rights."

More than 70 people remain in detention under the ISA and have not been tried in court for any crime.

Background

For decades Malaysia has received international criticism in relation to its security legislation, particularly the ISA. The legislation violates internationally recognised human rights standards, and has been used against people peacefully expressing their religious and political beliefs. Allowing for arrest without warrant and indefinite detention without trial, hundreds of people have spent years, and in some cases decades in prison without ever appearing in court. Through a combination of solitary confinement, incommunicado detention and aggressive interrogation techniques some of those same people have been subjected to physical and psychological ill-treatment, sometimes amounting to torture.

Those arrested under the ISA have included opposition activists, film-makers, students, suspected "terrorists", labourers, civil society leaders, and religious scholars. More than forty people have been arrested under the ISA in 2002. Over 4,000 people have been detained under the act since the 1960s.

For more information, please see:

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280142003>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280062003>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280102002>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280052002>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280012002>

<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa280082001>

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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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