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Myanmar: Release remaining prisoners of conscience

The Myanmar authorities should immediately and unconditionally free all prisoners of conscience, Amnesty International said as 80 inmates, including some 24 political prisoners and 34 foreigners, were released from prison on Tuesday.

Among the 80 released on “humanitarian grounds” were three members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), Myanmar’s leading opposition party, but the largest group is affiliated with All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), an armed group of students formed after the political violence of 1988.

“While we welcome the latest releases, it is crucial that the Myanmar authorities release all other remaining prisoners of conscience, imprisoned solely for the peaceful expression of their beliefs”, said Amnesty International’s Benjamin Zawacki.

“At least 400 more political prisoners remain behind bars in Myanmar. Even if they are alleged to have committed or advocated violence, they should be afforded a fair trial under an internationally recognized offence or be released.”

Sentences of the political prisoners released varied from 3 years to one person serving life.

According to some reports, the former prisoners could still have their sentences reinstated, however, as conditions under Myanmar’s Criminal Code are attached to their releases.

The state-run newspaper, The New Light of Myanmar, said the 46 Burmese citizens were released “with a view to ensuring the stability of the State and making eternal peace” and “national reconciliation”.

“With the assistance of the UN, the Myanmar government must now establish a mechanism to review the cases of all prisoners there to determine the true reason that they were arrested,” said Zawacki.

“Since there are undoubtedly political prisoners in Myanmar whose names have not been recorded — particularly in ethnic minority areas — this review process should go well beyond even the longest of the outstanding lists.

Among the released was ethnic Karenni political activist Khun Kawrio, who was given a lengthy jail term for his peaceful political activism during 2008. He was sent to a prison far from his home, making family visits difficult, and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment during interrogation.

“For some of those released, psycho-social problems including post-traumatic stress disorder for victims of torture and solitary confinement, will require urgent attention and resources for rehabilitation purposes,” said Zawacki.

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To arrange interview or for more information please contact press officer Katya Nasim:
katya.nasim@amnesty.org + 44 207 413 5871 / +44 7904398103