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Myanmar: Freedom for U Win Tin but 2,100 political prisoners remain behind bars

Amnesty International welcomes the release of at least seven prisoners of conscience in Myanmar, including U Win Tin who had been imprisoned for 19 years and was one of the longest-serving prisoners of conscience in the country. The fate of the other estimated 2,100 political prisoners who are still behind bars in Myanmar remains, however, a cause for concern, said Amnesty International today.

“While the release of U Win Tin and his fellow prisoners is certainly the best news to come out of Myanmar for a long time, unfortunately they don’t even represent one percent of the political prisoners there,” said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International’s Myanmar researcher. “These seven people should never have been imprisoned in the first place, and there are many, many more who should also be released.”

Amnesty International notes unconfirmed reports that the government of Myanmar may grant “amnesty” to as many as 9,000 prisoners in the run-up to planned elections in 2010. However, it remains unclear whether this figure includes political prisoners.

U Win Tin refused to accept an amnesty by the government, as to do so would have implied that the reason for his imprisonment was legitimate. Reports indicate that there were no conditions on his release.

“Prisoners of conscience, like those released today, are exactly what the term says: people sent to prison simply because of what they believe, and the peaceful actions they take because of those beliefs,” added Benjamin Zawacki. “They have done nothing wrong and we call for their immediate and unconditional release.”

U Win Tin is a 78 year old journalist, prominent dissident and senior official in the main opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The other six prisoners of conscience released are also NLD members and four are MPs-elect from the 1990 elections in which the NLD was victorious.

- Dr. Daw May Win Myint (female), 58, an MP-elect, and Dr. Than Nyein (male), also an MP-elect, 71, were imprisoned in 1997 for organizing an NLD meeting. Their original sentences had been repeatedly extended since 2004 and they suffer from poor health.
- Win Htein (male), 66, a senior assistant to NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, was imprisoned in 1996 for, among other offences, organizing farmers and NLD members to collect agricultural statistics. He had been held in solitary confinement and suffers from numerous health problems, including hypertension and heart disease.

- Aung Soe Myint Oo (male), an NLD MP-elect, was sentenced in August 2003 to seven years, for 'having a motorcycle without a license' but was widely believed to have been targeted for his political activities.
- U Khin Maung Swe, (male) 66, an NLD MP-elect, was sentenced in August 1994 to seven years in prison.
- U Than Naing (male), a member of the NLD.

"The release of these seven political prisoners is most welcome. But this is not -- and cannot be seen as -- an end in itself, only the beginning," said Benjamin Zawacki.

Background

Amnesty International issued an Urgent Action to its supporters about U Win Tin in July this year. He had been in Yangon's Insein Prison, often in solitary confinement, for much of the past 19 years and had not received the medical treatment he needed.

U Win Tin was arrested on 4 July 1989, during a crackdown on opposition political party members. He was sentenced three times to a total of 21 years' imprisonment. U Win Tin was most recently sentenced in March 1996 to an additional seven years' imprisonment for writing to the United Nations about prison conditions and for writing and circulating anti-government pamphlets/leaflets in prison. The authorities characterized this as "secretly publishing propaganda to incite riots in jail."

U Win Tin had written a document for the UN which he called The testimonials of prisoners of conscience from Insein Prison who have been unjustly imprisoned; demands and requests regarding human rights violations in Burmain which he described torture and lack of medical treatment in prison. While the authorities were investigating the writing of this letter, U Win Tin was held in a cell designed for military dogs, without bedding. He was deprived of food and water, and family visits, for long periods.