

Thein Sein breaks promise to free all political prisoners

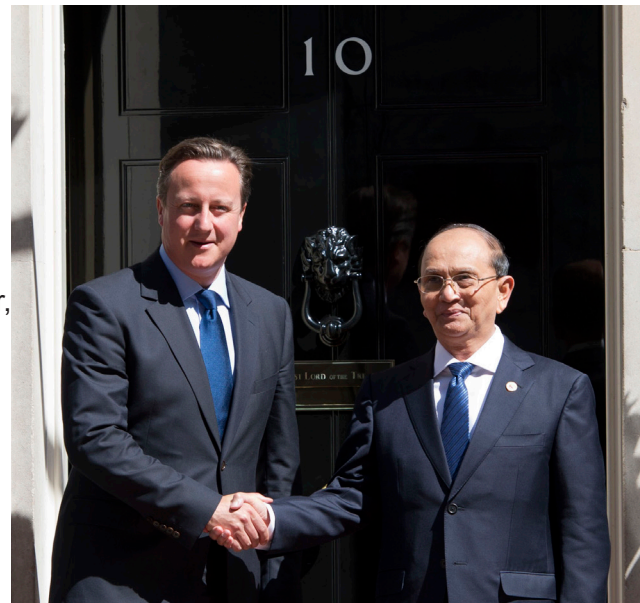
With just hours to go before the end of 2013, the Burmese government announced it was freeing all political prisoners still in jail. President Thein Sein had promised to free all political prisoners by the end of 2013 when he visited the UK in July.

In December a total of 59 political prisoners were released, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners. 41 political prisoners were released in early December and on 30 December a further 16 political prisoners were released. However, despite government claims that all political prisoners have been released, many people remain in jail because of their political activities, ethnicity or religion. The promise by President Thein Sein to release all political prisoners by the end of 2013 was not met.

Hundreds of people could still be in detention or face detention because of their political activities, ethnicity or religion. Even people whose cases have been verified by the political prisoner scrutiny committee have not been freed. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners Burma has verified around 33 political prisoners who are still in jail.

More than 100 people are on or awaiting trial, for their political activities and unknown numbers of ethnic Kachin are in jail under the Unlawful Associations Act. Around 1,000 ethnic Rohingya were unlawfully detained following violence in June 2012. Around 200 were released in the first week of 2014, but most remain in jail and the United Nations has reported that they did not receive fair trials. Almost all repressive laws remain in place.

The current political prisoner scrutiny committee established by President Thein Sein has not brought an end to the problem of political prisoners in Burma. A permanent independent review mechanism to address the ongoing problem of political prisoners in Burma needs to be established. It should not only have the power to recommend the release of political prisoners, but also make proposals for repressive laws which should be repealed.



President Thein Sein promised to release all political prisoners by the end of 2013 during his visit to the UK in July 2013.

Released Political Prisoners re-arrested

Some of the recently released political prisoners have since been quickly re-arrested.

A few hours after being released on 10 December 2013, Ko Htin Kyaw, leader of the Movement for Democracy Current Force (MDCF), a community-based organisation that represents grass-roots communities and protests against land-grabbing and other human rights violations, was re-arrested

under Section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Procession Law and an additional charge of sedition.

Labour activist Aye Thein, another activist released on 10 December, was immediately rearrested on several charges, including sedition.

Ko De Nyein Lin, a political prisoner who was released on 11 December 2013, is now facing

a new charge under Section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Procession Law. He participated in a demonstration in front of the Chinese Embassy in Rangoon to protest against the crackdown on monks at a protest camp near the Letpadaung Taung Copper Mine Project in December 2012.

A former political prisoner and member of Myanmar Social Development Network, Ko Nay Myo Zin has been re-arrested and charged under Section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Procession Law for holding a talk show without obtaining prior approval.

Following her release in November 2013, Naw Ohn Hla was arrested again in December and faces new charges relating to organising prayer sessions at the Shwedagon Pagoda in 2007 for the release of political prisoners. Naw Ohn Hla is a leading member of the Democracy and Peace Women Network, which campaigns for women's rights.



Human rights activist Naw Ohn Hla was released in November but re-arrested in December.

On 19 December two Kachin civilians, Brang Yung and Lahpai Gam, had their sentences increased from 2 to 7 years in jail. They are Kachin farmers who were arrested in June 2012, tortured brutally by the military-backed government and forced to make false confessions about their connections with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and bombings in the area.

Calls for Constitutional change grow

The National League for Democracy is stepping up its calls for amendments to the 2008 Constitution to make it more democratic.

Aung San Suu Kyi has started touring the country to gather support for constitutional change ahead of elections due to be held in 2015. Among the changes she is calling for is the removal of a clause which imposes restrictions on presidential candidates, effectively preventing Aung San Suu

Kyi from becoming President. Speaking at a rally in Thayarwaddy Township, Pegu Division in December, Aung San Suu Kyi said, "There will be no fair elections with the current constitution."

Ethnic groups want to see fundamental changes to the constitution to a federal system of government which would guarantee ethnic rights and greater self-determination.

Burma's Constitution was drafted by the military dictatorship and hands ultimate power to the military. The military are guaranteed 25% of seats in the Parliament and the military remains completely unaccountable, above both the President and the Parliament, and constitutionally able to veto anything the President or Parliament does. The Constitution also denies ethnic groups autonomy and ethnic rights. According to the Constitution, amendments can only be made with the support of more than 75% of parliament members, followed by more than 50% approval in a nationwide referendum.

A parliamentary Committee was set up in July 2013 to review the Constitution. Aung San Suu Kyi is a member of the committee but it is dominated by the military. Of the 109 members, 50 members are from the military backed party, the USDP, and 25 are from the military.

The committee has received over 2,500 suggestions for constitutional reform from political parties, organisations and individuals and is due to meet in January to discuss the proposals.

Thai authorities implicated in trafficking thousands of Rohingya refugees

A Reuters report in December revealed "a clandestine policy to remove Rohingya refugees from Thailand's immigration detention centers and deliver them to human traffickers waiting at sea".

The investigation revealed that thousands of Rohingya have passed through one of at least three secret "trafficking camps" in southern Thailand. The report revealed harrowing conditions in the camps, resulting in an unknown number of refugees beaten and murdered by camp guards or dying from dehydration or disease. Camp guards also demanded money from their friends or relatives for their release. According to the report, Thai immigration officials collaborated with the traffickers by taking Rohingya refugees held in Thailand out to sea and handing them over to the traffickers.

The continued systematic discrimination, intimidation and violence against Rohingya in

Arakan State in Burma has forced many to flee the country. The Arakan Project said that an estimated 9,000 Rohingya fled by boat from Bangladesh and Burma in November.

Burmese Army troops use forced labour in eastern Shan State

The Shan Human Rights Foundation reports that villagers in Murng Paeng township, Shan State, are being used as forced labour by Burmese government troops who are providing security to military-linked logging operations for the Ta Sang dam project on the Salween River. The loggers are clearing out teak forests from the projected flood zone for export to neighbouring countries.

Villagers have been forced to work as military porters and guides, and to build and repair army camps and roads. The soldiers have also extorted food and money from villagers, and commandeered their vehicles.

Pipe bomb found outside Muslim orphanage in Shan State

A pipe bomb was found outside a Muslim orphanage in Taunggyi, Shan State, on 25 December, according to Mizzima News. The pipe bomb was discovered inside a plastic bag and military officials carried out a controlled detonation. Three other pipe bombs were discovered in a gutter in Taunggyi earlier in December.

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