

## More political prisoners released

On 13 January, Burma's government released 651 prisoners, including around 300 political prisoners. Many of those released were high profile activists, such as 88 Generation leader Min Ko Naing, ethnic Shan leader U Khun Tun Oo, and monk leader U Gambira.

The regime also released former SPDC Prime Minister Khin Nyunt and other military intelligence officials who had been imprisoned following Khin Nyunt's arrest in October 2004.

The release of so many high profile prisoners in January is a major step and shows that keeping up the pressure for the release of all political prisoners before major economic sanctions are lifted is starting to work. However, hundreds of political prisoners remain in jail. There is also concern that many of the political prisoners were reportedly released with conditions which mean that if they are arrested again, they will serve the new prison term, and the old prison term they didn't finish serving will be added to it. All the laws under which they were arrested remain in place. Sithu Zeya, a journalist with the Democratic Voice of Burma who was among those released, said, "it's a release with a rope around my neck."



Min Ko Naing, who was released on 13 January 2012.

The government still does not officially recognise the existence of political prisoners. Former political prisoners still have criminal records, and receive no compensation or support for the medical care they need to recover from torture, mistreatment and psychological abuses.

"Today we have something to celebrate, but the problem of political prisoners in Burma isn't over yet," said Wai Hnin, Campaigns Officer at Burma Campaign UK, and daughter of Ko Mya Aye, a political prisoner who was released in January. "The next step must be for the International Committee of the Red Cross to be able to go into jails to make an assessment of how many political prisoners are still in jail, and then they must also be released."

## NLD prepares for by-elections

On 5 January, the government's Election Commission officially approved the National League for Democracy's (NLD) registration to take part in the upcoming by-elections on 1 April. The by-elections are to fill 48 vacant parliamentary seats, most of which became vacant when cabinet members and deputy ministers took up their posts. Under Burma's 2008 Constitution, members of the government have to resign as MPs before they can take up a government post.



Aung San Suu Kyi at Yae Phyu Tavoy township 29 Jan 12

The NLD has nominated candidates for all 48 seats and Aung San Suu Kyi is registered to run for a parliamentary seat in Kawhmu Township, Rangoon Division.

Thousands of supporters came out to greet Aung San Suu Kyi when she made her first campaign trip outside Rangoon to Dawei, Tenasserim Division to support the local NLD candidate.

### **William Hague visits Burma**

British Foreign Secretary William Hague arrived in Burma on 5 January for a two-day visit, the first visit by a British Foreign Secretary in 56 years. He held meetings with President Thein Sein, Aung San Suu Kyi, and representatives of ethnic political parties which are not banned by the government.

During the visit, William Hague welcomed the political progress in Burma. He stressed that while there is opportunity for change and that the UK and European Union would be willing to respond positively to real reform in Burma, there was still much more that needed to be done before sanctions could be lifted. This includes the release of all political prisoners, an end to human rights abuses by the army, peace talks to resolve ethnic conflicts and the holding of free and fair elections.

He also stressed that the military-backed government should be judged by its actions, not its words. So far the government hasn't delivered on their promises and many political prisoners remain in jail.



### **Government signs peace agreements with four ethnic groups**

Following recent talks with armed ethnic groups, the government signed initial peace agreements in January with the Shan State Army-South (SSA-S), the Chin National Front (CNF), the Karen National Union (KNU), and the Shan State Army-North (SSA-N).

The agreements appear to be preliminary ceasefire agreements, but the details will require further

discussion. In an interview with DVB, David Thackabaw, vice president of the KNU said, "This is the very initial stage in the ceasefire process. There are many steps we still have to take to reach our final goal of establishing a real democracy."

Despite the agreements, the Burma Army has continued to reinforce its troop numbers in Karen State and attacks by the Burmese Army against civilians in Karen and Shan state have continued.

The government has so far failed to reach an agreement with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). The KIO had a ceasefire agreement with the dictatorship for 17 years but during this time, the regime refused to discuss a political solution to the conflict. The ceasefire was broken by the Burmese army after the sham elections in November 2010 and the KIO say that any new agreement must include a commitment to a political process to solve the root causes of conflict.

### **Military attacks against civilians continue in Kachin State**

On 13 January, President Thein Sein issued an order for Burmese Army forces to cease hostilities against all ethnic armed groups in Burma. However, attacks have continued. In Kachin State, the Burmese Army has been deliberately targeting civilians since resuming conflict. Villages are being attacked, women gang-raped by Burmese Army soldiers, and civilians shot on sight. The attacks by the Burmese Army have forced up to 50,000 people to flee their homes. The military-backed government continues to block international aid from reaching these people.

On 11 January, a pregnant ethnic Kachin woman was shot and killed by Burmese Army soldiers. Mangshang Ying Wang was shot by Burmese Army soldiers on 11 January 2012 at 9am. She was shot on Hpakan Road, Kachin State. It is believed that soldiers from battalion 58 under the command of Lieutenant Ye Min Twi, Lieutenant Ko Ko Latt and Colonel Htun Naing are in charge of soldiers in that area. Mangshang Ying Wang was four months pregnant. She was taken to hospital where she died later that day. Another woman, Gawlu Seng Hkawn was shot and injured in the attack.



Mangshang Ying Wang

## **EU relaxes visa ban**

EU Foreign Ministers met on 23 January to discuss Burma policy. They agreed to suspend the application of the visa ban against senior government officials, including the president, the vice presidents, cabinet members and the speakers of the two houses of parliament, in response to changes that have taken place in Burma.

The move was widely welcomed as an appropriate and proportional response to developments in Burma. However, there is concern that the very upbeat and optimistic Council conclusions issued by EU Foreign Ministers may be designed to pave the way for a much deeper relaxation of sanctions in April, which cannot be justified by steps taken so far by the military-backed government.

“Sanctions are an important tool for encouraging further change in Burma, but to give away too many sanctions too soon could undermine incentives for deeper and more fundamental political reforms in Burma,” said Anna Roberts, Executive Director of Burma Campaign UK. “There are reasons for hope, but reasons to be cautious as well.”

There are welcome changes in Burma, but so far no repressive laws have been repealed and no power or control relinquished by the government or military. There is not yet any inclusive political process for dialogue towards a transition to democracy and national reconciliation, or to tackle the root cause of conflict in ethnic areas.

Burma Campaign UK has produced a Briefing Paper analysing the Council conclusions, available at: <http://www.burmacampaign.org.uk/index.php/news-and-reports/burma-briefing/title/analysis-of-eu-conclusions-on-burma>

## **IMF delegation visits Burma**

From 9 to 25 January, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegation visited Naypyidaw and Rangoon in a follow-up to its October-November 2011 visit. During the visit, the delegation met with regime Minister of Energy Than Htay, Minister of Finance and Revenue Hla Tun, Burma Central Bank Governor Than Nyein, and other officials.

At the end of the visit, the IMF released a statement highlighting Burma's potential for high economic growth and detailing the reforms necessary for economic development, including reforming the exchange rate.

In a speech to the World Economic Forum on 26 January, Aung San Suu Kyi highlighted broader concerns about economic development, saying that “Economic progress is dependent on more than the fiscal and monetary measures that have been advocated for Burma by international financial Institutions. Such measures will need to be upheld by judicial and legislative reforms, which will guarantee that sound regulations and laws will be administered justly and effectively.”

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