

No mass release of political prisoners - Their Sein more hardline than Than Shwe?

On 16 May, Burma's new dictator, Their Sein, announced that all prisoners would have their sentences reduced by one year, and that those on death row would have their sentences commuted to life imprisonment.

There had been speculation that there would be a mass prisoner amnesty, which happens regularly in Burma. However, Their Sein is increasingly showing himself to be as or more hard-line than former dictator Than Shwe. In the first few months of becoming dictator, Than Shwe first acknowledged that there were political prisoners, and then released 427 political prisoners. In contrast, Their Sein's government denies political prisoners even exist, and instead of announcing the release of political prisoners, or releasing significant numbers under the cover of a general prisoner amnesty, has instead announced only that all prisoners will have their sentences reduced by one year, and that those on death row will have their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. This is a mechanism designed to avoid releasing senior opposition leaders, many of whom were given sentences of 65 years or more after the pro-democracy uprising in 2007. One political prisoner is serving a 104 year sentence.



Thein Sein briefing Than Shwe. Published in New Light of Myanmar.

More than 2,000 political prisoners are in jail in Burma. Many have been tortured, and are denied proper medical care. An estimated 55 political prisoners were released as a result of all prisoners having their sentences reduced by one year.

Conflict continues across Eastern Burma

In Shan State, there has been a major increase in human rights abuses since the dictatorship broke a 22-year ceasefire agreement with the Shan State Army-North in March.

As a result of the attacks by the Burmese Army, on 21st May the leaders of Shan State Army North and South announced that the two armies had united. The Shan State Army split when the SSA-North signed a ceasefire with the government in 1996 while the Shan State Army-South continued its armed struggle.

"There is only one Shan State Army now. SSA 'South' and SSA 'North' don't exist any longer. It is clear that we have the same enemy and fighting for the same ideal," said General Yawd Serk, the leader of the Shan State Army-South. Colonel Sai Htoo from the Shan State Army-North said, "Before, we

believed that we could solve the problems with the Burma Army by political means and we concluded ceasefire with them. But their actions didn't match their words. This is why we decided to return to the struggle."

The British government has stated that it is 'deeply concerned' about the Burmese Army breaking its ceasefire with the Shan State Army North. It also stated that 'only a genuine process of national reconciliation leading to a just political settlement can bring peace and stability to the country and its neighbours.'

In Kachin State, tension between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Burmese Army remains high and the regime has deployed additional troops into KIA-controlled areas. Shots were fired between Burmese and Kachin troops on 27 May, according to the Kachin News Group.

Continued fighting in Karen State forced more than 1,000 villagers to flee to Thailand. However, according to The Irrawaddy, they were reportedly forced back across the border to the conflict areas.

Political prisoners on hunger strike

Nearly 30 political prisoners, including seven women and three Buddhist Monks, staged hunger strikes in May to demand better prison conditions.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported that 7 of the political prisoners who were on a hunger strike in Insein Prison were placed in solitary confinement in military dog cells, which are small cells where dogs are usually kept and notorious for brutal torture and extreme punishment.

The Democratic Voice of Burma news organisation marked World Press Freedom Day on 3 May with the launch of a campaign to free its 17 jailed video journalists, all of whom are serving lengthy sentences in prisons across the country.

Burma snubbed in bid for ASEAN chair

Ahead of the ASEAN summit in Jakarta at the beginning of May, Burma announced that it was seeking to chair ASEAN in 2014.

The move prompted widespread criticism. Human Rights Watch said, "Rewarding Burma with ASEAN's chairmanship after it staged sham elections and still holds 2,000 political prisoners would be an embarrassment for the region."

In a humiliating snub for the regime in Burma, ASEAN did not accept Burma's proposal to chair in 2014 but instead delayed any decision. Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said: "ASEAN leaders do not object in principle. But Myanmar, which is a focus of world attention, is expected to continue progress on democracy so when it becomes chair it does not generate negative views."

Ade Padmo Sarwono, Indonesia's Foreign Ministry director for ASEAN cooperation in politics and security, said that to become chair, both infrastructure and political development were required and that Indonesia expected a "genuine democracy and reconciliation that involves all parties in Myanmar."

According to Democratic Voice of Burma, Thailand's Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya reportedly told his Australian counterpart Kevin Rudd that Burma must release all 2,100 political prisoners at the very least before ASEAN considers giving it the 2014 chair.

Burma had been scheduled to chair an ASEAN summit in 2006, but was forced to miss its turn to chair because of widespread criticism of its human rights record.

UN Human Rights Rapporteur says abuses "widespread" and "unaddressed"

UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in Burma Tomás Ojea Quintana conducted a seven-day visit to Thailand in May to gather information about the human rights situation in Burma. The regime refuses to allow Quintana to visit the country.

On 23 May, at a press conference held in Bangkok, Quintana said: "Violence continues in many of these [border] areas. Systematic militarization contributes to human rights abuses. These abuses include land confiscation, forced labor, internal displacement, extrajudicial killings and sexual violence. They are widespread, they continue today, and they remain essentially unaddressed by the authorities. I am concerned that the Government is not finding a political solution to solve the ethnic conflicts."

He also highlighted the fact that truth, justice and accountability are key to national reconciliation, saying: "a commission of inquiry might be one way to address the issue. I discussed the issue with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. She supports a commission of inquiry absolutely. She said a commission of inquiry is a commission of inquiry, not a tribunal. I agree with her. The idea of a commission of inquiry is that it would be an instrument to bring about transition to democracy, national reconciliation and establishment of accountability. It should pursue the truth and facilitate reparations. It should also end and prevent ongoing human rights abuses."

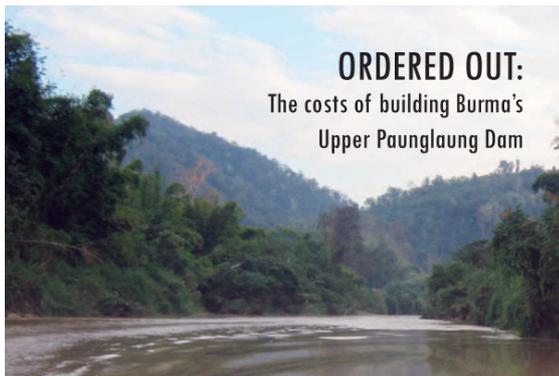
UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon's Chief of Staff Vijay Nambiar arrived in Burma for a three-day visit on 11 May. He met regime ministers and officials, as well as Aung San Suu Kyi, NLD leaders, MPs, and civil society organisations.

8,000 people to be displaced by European-Chinese dam project in Burma

A new report from the Kayan New Generation Youth reveals how military authorities in Burma have ordered 8,000 people to move from their homes in preparation for a hydroelectric dam being constructed by European and Chinese companies that will power Naypyitaw, the country's new capital.

The Upper Paunglaung Dam, located in Shan State 50 kilometres southeast of Naypyitaw, will produce 140 Megawatts of power and is nearly 60% finished. Swiss engineering firm Af Colenco has the contract

for construction design and is overseeing the project. London-based Malcolm Dunstan Associates as well as Yunnan Machinery and Export Company are also involved in the project.



They were arrested 13 years ago on Landfall Island by the Indian Military. They appear to have been tricked by a rogue Indian Military intelligence official, who had told them they could land there with the permission and support of the military. These 34 resistance fighters never intentionally broke any Indian law. They thought they were in India with the permission of the Indian government.

The 34 come from two ethnic nationalities in Burma, Arakanese and Karen, which face persecution from the dictatorship ruling Burma. Burma Campaign UK is now working to make sure they are guaranteed safety and support, and that they will not be deported back to Burma.

The report also reveals that the regional commander and township authorities have notified villagers they must leave by October this year and will receive just US \$50 in compensation. A 61-square kilometre reservoir created by the dam will flood the entire Paunglaung valley, the only fertile plain in the area, destroying the local economy and putting pressure on the surrounding forests.

Forced labour to service army battalions brought in to secure the dam and tight restrictions on the local population have been associated with the project since 2004. Workers at the construction site are paid just US\$30 per month and are often paid late.



34 resistance fighters from Burma released from India prison

34 resistance fighters from Burma, who had been held in prison in India for more than 13 years, despite never having committed a crime, were released in May.

Burma Campaign UK and other organisations worldwide have been campaigning for their release and in February this year, 38 organisations in 18 countries took part in a global day of action in support of the 34.

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