

### 215 political activists sentenced in November

The military junta sentenced at least 215 political activists and monks during November, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP). The first trial of activists arrested in connection with last year's uprising in August and September began on 8 October 2007. Since then at least 384 activists have been sentenced.

The sentences recently handed down range from 4 months on charges of 'contempt of court' for National League for Democracy (NLD) lawyers U Khin Maung Shein and U Aung Thein, to life imprisonment plus 8 years for Human Rights Defenders and Promoters network founding member U Myint Aye on explosives charges.

Zarganar, Burma's most famous comedian and who was arrested in connection with his efforts to co-ordinate voluntary relief efforts after May's Cyclone Nargis, received sentences totaling 59 years. Two other cyclone aid volunteers were also sentenced at the same trial - journalist, social worker and former political prisoner Zaw Thet Htwe was sentenced to a total of 19 years and Thant Zin Aung was sentenced to a total of 18 years.

All Burma Monks' Alliance leader U Gambira, who played a leading role in last year's Saffron Revolution, was given sentences totaling 68 years.

Twenty-three members of the 88 Generation Students Group, who led the protests against fuel price hikes in August last year, were given sentences of at least 65 years each. They include Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, Mya Aye, Htay Kywe, Pyone Cho (aka) Htay Win Aung, Aung Thu, Hla Myo Naung, Aung Naing (aka) Myo Aung Naing and Nyan Lin, who were sentenced by a special court held inside Ma-ubin Prison on 11 November.

On 15 November, the Burmese authorities began to systematically transfer political prisoners to prisons all around the country, far from their families. At least 136 political prisoners have been transferred, including the 88 Generation Student Group's leaders. Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi and Min Zeya have been transferred to Kengtung, Mai Sat and Lashio prisons respectively, all in Shan State. Meanwhile Htay Kywe has been moved to Buthidaung prison in Arakan State in the west of the country, and Htay Win Aung aka Pyone Cho has been moved to Kawthaung Prison in Tenasserim division in the far south.

"It is no coincidence that the most important leaders of the 88 Generation Students Group have been transferred to the prisons furthest away from their families in Rangoon," said Bo Kyi, Joint-Secretary of the AAPP. "This is just another form of psychological torture by the regime. It will take a lot of time, money and effort for their families to visit and provide essential food and medicine."

Many of the prisons in the remoter border areas have high rates of malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS. Some of the prisons have no prison hospital ward or doctor, for example Katha and Hkamti Prisons in Sagaing Division.



Zarganar



Pyone Cho, Ko Ko Gyi, Min Ko Naing and Htay Kywe

## Women human rights defenders sentenced

On the 11th of November 2008 the regime sentenced prominent women human rights defenders including Nilar Thein, Su Su Nway and Mie Mie to 65 years' imprisonment and transferred them to remote prisons.



Nilar Thein, with her husband, Ko Jimmy and their baby

Nilar Thein, one of the leading activists in the protest marches in August 2007, went into hiding leaving her 4-month-old baby behind to escape the regime's crackdown but she was arrested on 10 September 2008. Su Su Nway, a prominent labour activist who had been on the run for 3 months after the

regime's crackdown on the Saffron Revolution, was arrested on 13 November 2007. She has been denied medical treatment for her heart disease, and has reportedly been kept in isolated confinement. Mie Mie, a key activist involved in the 2007 August peaceful protests, was arrested in October 2007. She has been suffering from a heart condition and has been denied medical attention during detention.

## Journalists sentenced

Two journalists, Thet Zin and Sein Win Maung, who were arrested on 16 February 2008, were also sentenced to 7 years in prison by a closed-door court held inside Insein Prison Compound on 28 November. Thet Zin is a former political prisoner and Editor-in-Chief of the Myanmar Nation Weekly Journal. Sein Win Maung was the Administrative Manager of the journal and they were arrested together while the junta's security forces raided the journal office and their homes.

## Members of the Generation Wave imprisoned

Two members of the Generation Wave, formed during the Saffron Revolution in September 2007, were sentenced by a court held inside Insein Prison Compound on Nov 24, 2008. Saw Maung and Tin Myo Htut (aka) Kyaw Oo received 8 years each.

## UN experts condemn harsh sentences and unfair trials

Five United Nations experts have strongly condemned the severe convictions and unfair trials of political prisoners in Burma.

In a statement, the experts said that "the closed-door hearings are being held inside prisons by

courts which lack independence and impartiality. Three of the defence lawyers have been sentenced to several months of imprisonment for contempt of court, after they transmitted their clients' complaints of unfair trials." They urged the regime to "cease harassing and arresting individuals for peacefully exercising their internationally recognized human rights. They further demand that all detainees be retried in open hearings respecting fair trial standards and the immediate release of their defence counsels."

The experts are: The Special Rapporteurs Mr. Tomas Ojea Quintana (situation of human rights in Myanmar), Mr. Leandro Despouy (independence of judges and lawyers), Mr. Frank La Rue (freedom of opinion and expression), Ms. Margaret Sekaggya (situation of human rights defenders) and Ms. Asma Jahangir (freedom of religion or belief).

## Security Council Silent

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon issued a statement saying he was "deeply concerned by recent reports of sentences and severe prison terms" and calling for the release of all political prisoners. However, despite international calls for action, the Security Council failed to meet to discuss the crisis.

In October last year, the UN Security Council issued a Presidential Statement calling for the Burma's military junta to release all political prisoners. However, the regime has defied the Security Council by doubling the number of political prisoners. Ban Ki-moon is due to visit Burma in December, but there are fears he may back out of the visit because of the difficulties in negotiating with the regime.

"These sentences make it all the more important that Ban Ki-moon goes ahead with his visit", said Nang Seng, Campaigns Officer at Burma Campaign UK. "Ban Ki-moon says he won't go unless there is progress, but unless he goes there will be no progress. We have had 37 visits to Burma by UN envoys, but things have only got worse. We need his personal engagement on Burma. UN envoy visits don't work."

## Burma 'still hampering cyclone aid'

Six months after Cyclone Nargis caused massive devastation in Burma, Christian Aid reported that the regime is still obstructing aid. "Despite concessions made in the Irrawaddy Delta after the cyclone, the junta's restrictions on humanitarian access continue to obstruct aid workers in Burma," said Ray Hasan, Christian Aid's head of programme policy for the region.

Christian Aid partners say that the majority of the people affected are still unable to start the process of rebuilding their lives. Resources remain limited and restrictions on freedom of movement are still in place. Christian Aid says pressure must be maintained on the regime to ensure unrestricted access to the affected areas and that the needs of the most vulnerable communities affected by Nargis are prioritised.

### **UN confirms junta's systematic use of sexual violence**

The UN's CEDAW Committee (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women) has confirmed the systematic use of rape and sexual violence, particularly against ethnic minority women, by the Burmese regime. The committee also expressed concern about the regime's new constitution, which would effectively enshrine discrimination against women due to the presumed exclusion from the 25% of parliamentary seats reserved for the military. The constitution also excludes women from certain kinds of jobs.

In their concluding observations, the Committee expressed "its deep concern at the high prevalence of sexual and other forms of violence, including rape, perpetrated by members of the armed forces against rural ethnic women, including, inter alia, the Shan, Mon, Karen, Palaung, and Chin. The Committee is also concerned at the apparent impunity of the perpetrators of such violence, and at reports of threats, intimidation and punishment of the victims."

The Committee also addressed violence against women in Burma, stating that "the Committee expresses concern at the high prevalence of violence against women and girls, such as widespread ... sexual violence, including rape. The Committee is also concerned that such violence appears to be socially legitimized and accompanied by a culture of silence and impunity."

The Women's League of Burma (WLB), who submitted a report to the committee, called on the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women to carry out an investigation into the state-sanctioned sexual violence against women in Burma. They also called on the international community to take action to promote democracy in Burma, as the only way to safeguard the rights of women.

### **Political prisoners at risk of HIV from forcible injections**

Unconfirmed reports from inside Burma indicate that political prisoners run a high risk of contracting

HIV/AIDS because of unhygienic medical treatment. A report by Reporters Without Borders says that detained poet Aung Than, a member of the National League for Democracy, was probably infected with the HIV virus when he was forcibly injected in Insein prison hospital two years ago. Aung Than was sentenced in June 2006 to 19 years in prison for writing and distributing a collection of poems, "Daung Man" ("The force of the fighting peacock"), in tribute to Burma's pro-democracy movement.

According to the Irrawaddy magazine, one former political prisoner who served 14 years in Insein and Tharawaddy Prisons, said detainees were forbidden to possess hypodermic syringes and injections were carried out with shared needles, usually by ill-trained medics drawn from the prisoners themselves.

### **Landmine casualties rising**

On 21 November, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines released its annual Landmine Monitor Report. According to the report, in 2007 Burma was one of only two countries, the other being Russia, where new government use of antipersonnel mines was recorded. At least 438 landmine-related casualties were reported, all but nine were civilians, and resulted in 47 deaths. This is a significant increase from the 243 casualties reported in 2006 (20 killed and 223 injured). The report also highlighted the fact that the SPDC continues to force civilians to act as human mine sweepers.

### **Avaaz target Lloyd's over Burma links**



Campaign network Avaaz.org mobilised over 300,000 of its members in November to email Lloyd's of London, and Lloyd's syndicates known to have provided insurance to companies in Burma. "Our members will not stand by as Lloyd's help to fund Burma's brutal dictatorship," said Ricken Patel, Executive Director of Avaaz.org. "Over 800,000 people have taken part in our Burma campaigns in the past, and we are prepared to mobilise hundreds of thousands more until Lloyd's pulls out of the Burmese market, raising the pressure on the regime to open up and release political prisoners."

The British Government recently wrote to Lloyd's

of London chairman, Lord Levene, reminding him that the British government officially discourages trade and investment with Burma. Insurance from Lloyd's is vital to companies that invest in and trade with Burma. At least three Lloyd's syndicates are already known to insure risk in Burma - Catlin, Atrium and Kiln – and all three are also targeted in the Avaaz.org action. The campaign was launched after the Burma Campaign UK exposed Lloyd's' role in funding the Burmese dictatorship in a report, *Insuring Repression*, published in July 2008.

### **China to build new gas pipeline across Burma**

China has announced plans to build an oil and gas pipeline from the Bay of Bengal across Burma to China's Yunnan province, which is expected to start next year. According to the China Daily newspaper, the project includes a \$1.5 billion oil pipeline and \$1.04 billion gas line with China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) holding a 50.9 percent stake and Myanmar Oil & Gas Enterprise owning the remainder.

### **Burma saves \$8 million by substituting fuel with gas**

In a bid to save money, the regime has been converting petrol and diesel motor vehicles into compressed natural gas (CNG) ones. According to local media reports, this has saved nearly 8 million US dollars per month by cutting imported fuel and using domestically-produced natural gas.

According to the State Customs Department, Burma imported 374.06 million dollars of fuel in the fiscal year 2007-08, accounting for 13.2 percent of the total imports. Other official statistics indicate that Burma produced 7.62 million barrels of crude oil and 13.393 billion cubic-meters of natural gas in 2007-08. Natural gas topped Myanmar's exports in the year with 2.594 billion dollars representing 42.9 percent of the total exports during the year.

### **US Treasury targets Burmese drug cartel**

The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has named 26 individuals and 17 companies tied to Burma's Wei Hsueh Kang and the United Wa State Army (UWSA) as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act). This action freezes any assets the 43 designees may have under US jurisdiction and prohibits US citizens from conducting transactions or dealings in the property interests of the designated individuals and entities. The Kingpin Act aims to apply financial measures against significant foreign narcotics traffickers worldwide.

"The United Wa State Army is the largest and most powerful drug trafficking organization in Southeast Asia and is a major producer and exporter of synthetic drugs, including methamphetamine," said OFAC Deputy Director Barbara C. Hammerle. "Today OFAC is targeting the Wa's lieutenants and the financial holdings of this massive drug trafficking organization. We call on other nations to do the same."

### **Territorial dispute with Bangladesh escalates**

A row between the Burmese regime and Bangladesh over disputed maritime borders in the Bay of Bengal escalated after Burma sent warships to support Korean company Daewoo, which has been conducting exploratory drilling in the area. Bangladesh immediately deployed four warships to the area, resulting in a four-day standoff. Burma has discovered huge reserves of natural gas in the Bay of Bengal. Daewoo, which won drilling rights from the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, has now left the disputed area. Talks between Bangladesh and the regime have so far failed to provide any progress in resolving the dispute. New talks are scheduled for January 2009.

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FOR HUMAN RIGHTS  
AND DEMOCRACY IN BURMA**