



Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)

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ALLEGED AMNESTY IS HIGHLY LIMITED IN NATURE AND AMOUNTS TO A PALTRY REDUCTION OF HARSH PRISON TERMS

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On 2 January, President U Thein Sein of the Union Solidarity Development Party signed amnesty order 1/2012, authorizing a commutation of death sentences to life and a reduction in prison terms. Those prisoners serving more than 30 year sentences have had their sentences deducted to up to 30 years; prisoners with 20 to 30 year terms are now serving up to 20 years; and prisoners with less than 20 years will experience a one fourth deduction in their sentences.

“This order does not qualify as an amnesty as it is just a deplorable reduction in draconian prison terms. Political prisoners, especially those in prominent positions and in leadership roles, have been given extremely long sentences in an effort to exclude them from any future amnesties. Having a sentence reduced from 120 years to 90 years means nothing to those who sacrificed their lives for democratic transition and continue to languish behind bars. It is imperative that they are unconditionally and immediately released – the democracy movement in Burma cannot wait any longer, Bo Kyi, Joint-Secretary of AAPP said.”

Three times a so-called amnesty has been declared under President U Thein Sein and three times the domestic and international community has been deceived. These amnesties resulted in nothing more than an insignificant shaving off of unduly harsh prison terms. Although AAPP welcomes the release of any political prisoner, it bears repeating that one political prisoner behind bars is one political prisoner too many.

This most recent amnesty is no different than past amnesties where only a small number of political prisoners were released. AAPP can confirm that in the past amnesties ordered by U Thein Sein, only 0.75% of those released were political prisoners. Approximately 14,600 prisoners were freed on 17 May 2011, but only 72 of those were political prisoners. Under the second amnesty on 12 October 2011, 6,359 prisoners were released, with only 241 of those being political prisoners. As of the end of the day 4 January, AAPP can confirm that 34 political prisoners have been freed. However, the majority of them were nearing the end of their sentences. Those who have a critical role to play in the democratic and national reconciliation process, along with fostering the nascent civil society, will continue to remain behind bars for decades. Ethnic leader U Khun Htun Oo, 88 Generation leader Min

Ko Naing, revered monk leader U Gambira, individual activists, students, and women who were given long imprisonments are ostensibly excluded from this shameless amnesty.

“This amnesty is wholly insufficient and directly contravenes statements made by the administration’s leading authorities that the majority of political prisoners would be released in January. These statements amount to mental torture both for the political prisoner and their loved ones who anticipate their freedom. It is a cruel tactic intended to wear down the spirit and morale of those imprisoned, Bo Kyi said”

The failure to release all political prisoners gives the people of Burma little hope for the fate of democracy and human rights. There can be no national reconciliation process or resolution of internal ethnic conflicts without the immediate release of all political prisoners. It is clear that these self-styled amnesties have been methodically designed to exclude political prisoners serving long prison terms, including 88 generation members. The repeated false steps taken by the U Thein Sein administration, where impending releases are highly trumpeted only to result in a paltry reduction in terms, foster suspicion and breed mistrust.

Political prisoners, arrested and sentenced under former military regimes, were arbitrarily deprived of their liberty and were not granted their universal right to a fair trial. If Burma wants to show itself as a nation in democratic transition, it needs to account for why over 1,000 political prisoners continue to be deprived of their most basic liberties. The release of all political prisoners depends solely on the authorization of President U Thein Sein; his failure to do so reveals his unwillingness to resolve this most pressing issue. Doing so would lay the foundation of a nation that conforms with the rule of law and human rights.

In the face of such an inadequate amnesty, AAPP repeats its calls for the U Thein Sein administration to recognize the existence of political prisoners, to secure their immediate and unconditional release, and to erase their criminal records. This is a necessary first step before Burma can move forward towards peace and national reconciliation.

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