



Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)

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PRISONER RELEASE LACKS SINCERITY

Information Release
October 13, 2011

Yesterday, the U Thein Sein administration attempted to appease the international community by offering its second so-called amnesty. Though the announcement was made on the 11th of October that 6,359 prisoners would be released, no public information about the actual numbers released has been made accessible.

AAPP has been monitoring the October 12 prisoner release and we have learned that 207 political prisoners have been freed so far. Many other prominent political prisoners such as Min Ko Naing, U Khun Tun Oo, U Gambira and so on were not included among those released. This prisoner release is not satisfactory. The timing of yesterday's events is well marked to coincide with other concerns, easing international pressure – specifically, the ASEAN chairmanship, the UN General Assembly and lifting economic sanctions. Given these conditions, the release of political prisoners cannot be seen as trustworthy.

The use of amnesties by past regimes has come at times of mounting international pressure and been used as tokens of change, rather than substance of change. This week's prisoner release does not suggest anything different from earlier amnesties. Even until today, the U Thein Sein regime in no way publicly acknowledges the existence of political prisoners. This is not a matter of semantics, rather a point which sheds light on how much honesty and transparency U Thein Sein regime is willing to expose.

By releasing political prisoners without recognizing them as political prisoners, the nominally civilian government is refusing to dignify their release and exonerate them from wrongful charges. Instead, this is a dishonest attempt at circumventing a truly genuine approach to democratic reform.

A more dignified approach would involve actually acknowledging the existence of all political prisoners, and then offer a specific unconditional amnesty to those political prisoners. The amnesty must be unconditional and not allow for the arbitrary re-arrest of those prisoners. In addition to recognizing and unconditionally releasing all political prisoners, it is equally necessary to erase the criminal records of all political prisoners in order for them to participate in the democratic transition and national reconciliation. Unless they are recognized as political prisoners and their records erased, they will continue to be persecuted in a form of on-going repression.

While AAPP welcomes the release of political prisoners, it is much too soon for euphoria. Let us not confuse the unrecognized release of a few political prisoners within a general prisoner release as the same thing as direct, irreversible action towards full democracy.

The events surrounding the release of a few political prisoners highlight the disingenuous nature of the regime's actions and, as a result, there remains a critical barrier to the trust building phase needed for national reconciliation and democratic transition.

We would like to urge the international community to persuade U Thein Sein government for the recognition of the existence of political prisoners, and for the unconditional release of all political prisoners under a dignified way.

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