

Network of Concerned Historians				NCH
Campaigns				
Year original	Year follow-up	Circular	Country	Names
2000		18	Burma/ Myanmar	Ma Khin Khin Leh, history teacher

Announcement

The American Association for the Advancement of Science has issued an urgent alert for four female scientists imprisoned in Myanmar (Burma). Among them is Ma Khin Khin Leh, a thirty-four-year-old history teacher in Pegu, detained in July 1999 with her three-year-old child instead of her husband, a political activist who attempted to organize a pro-democracy march. Her child was released after five days. In December 1999 Ma Khin Khin Leh was sentenced to life imprisonment. Her present whereabouts and current status are unknown. We eagerly hope that you join the campaign for Ma Khin Khin Leh and the three other scientists.

Date: 5 December 2000.

Country: Burma (Myanmar).

Subject: Female Scientists Imprisoned in Burma (Myanmar).

Case Number: BU0009.Daw (Daw May Win Myint, Daw San San, Daw Shwe Bo, and Ma Khin Khin Leh).

Type of Alert: ALERT

Issues:

Freedom of speech, freedom of association, academic freedom, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, the right to a fair trial.

Facts of the case:

Burma (Myanmar) has been under military dictatorship since 1962. In September 1988, the armed forces brutally suppressed a massive pro-democracy movement. Since that time, a military junta, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), has ruled by decree, without a constitution or legislature. In the late 1980s, the SPDC made some concessions to the pro-democracy movement, including the right to form independent political parties. Burma held relatively open elections in 1990, during which voters overwhelmingly supported the opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD). The NLD won more than 60 percent of the popular vote and 80 percent of the parliamentary seats. However, the SPDC has not allowed the elected representatives to convene parliament.

Many women rose to prominent positions in the NLD party, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who serves as the General Secretary of the NLD. Suu Kyi won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and is the most well known of the Burmese dissidents. However, fifteen other women from the NLD party also won seats in the 485-member parliament. A number of the women who rose to prominent positions in the NLD are scientists.

Burma has an extremely poor human rights record. SPDC officials often arrest and detain individuals who express dissenting political views or advocate for democracy. Prison conditions are harsh and torture, especially in the first few months of detention, is common. The government has specifically targeted members of the NLD. The stories of the following four women are just a few examples of the estimated 1,300 political prisoners in Burma (Myanmar) today.

October 1997: Daw May Win Myint and Daw San San

On 28 October 1997, Daw May Win Myint and Daw San San were arrested with other prominent NLD members after attempting to hold a meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in the Mayangone Township, a suburb of Rangoon (Yangon). The meeting was to discuss restructuring the local branch of the NLD youth party. Daw May Win Myint and Daw San San were elected to the parliament in the 1980 elections. Daw May Win Myint is a medical doctor who worked in cooperative clinics, general hospitals, and a hospital for the handicapped. On 5 December 1997, she was sentenced to six years' imprisonment under Section 5j of the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act. Section 5j provides for the detention of anyone who attempts to "disrupt the morality or the behavior of a group of people or to disrupt the security or stability of the Union." This provision is often used to imprison political prisoners.

Daw San San, 70, is a former marine biologist. She has been a long-time pro-democracy advocate. After the military government's refusal to allow the democratically elected parliament to convene,

Daw San San participated in discussions on forming a parallel government in Mandalay. She was arrested for her participation in these meetings in April 1991. She was released a year later under a decree that provided for the release of political prisoners who are not considered a threat to national security. As a condition of her release, the SPDC required her to sign a commitment that she would not be involved in any political activities. She was arrested briefly again in 1996 in a mass arrest of hundreds of NLD members who were attempting to convene a congress of the political party. Following her arrest in October 1997 for her participation in the NLD youth meeting, Daw San San was held incommunicado for at least three months, without access to her family, doctors or lawyer.

Daw May Win Myint and Daw San San are currently being held in Insein Prison in Yangon, where they share a cell. The human rights group Reporters Without Frontiers describes their cell as follows: “The roof of the cell is very low and there is only a tiny window, so that air cannot circulate normally. Prisoners sleep on bamboo mats on the ground. The toilet-a mud bowl in the corner of the room-is only cleared once a day. From 6 a.m., the women are forced to sit cross-legged on the ground with their heads bowed. Once a day, for fifteen minutes, prisoners are taken to the ‘shower’ where they are allowed to talk.”

July 1999: Daw Shwe Bo and Ma Khin Khin Leh

Between 19 and 24 July 1999, 19 people were arrested in Pegu, in central Burma (Myanmar). Authorities detained them on suspicion that they were planning a pro-democracy march scheduled for 19 July. Between 16 and 18 July, pamphlets were distributed that announced the march. Messages were also spray-painted on walls throughout the city that called for supporting the NLD, reducing prices of goods, and increasing civil servants’ salaries. The non-violent march was planned for Martyrs’ Day, which commemorates the 52nd anniversary of General Aung San’s assassination. General Aung San fought for independence from the British after World War II. He was the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. Amnesty International considers all of those detained to be prisoners of conscience.

Among those detained were Daw Shwe Bo and Ma Khin Khin Leh. Daw Shwe Bo, 50, was a township medical officer. For her involvement in NLD activities, the government reportedly required her to resign from her post. Ma Khin Khin Leh, 34, is a history teacher. The local Military Intelligence arrested Ma Khin Khin Leh and her 3-year old daughter, Thaint Wunna Khin. They were arrested after SPDC officials attempted to detain her husband, Kyaw Wunna, a political activist and one of the organizers of the 19 July march. When security authorities could not locate him, they arrested his wife and child. Thaint Wunna Khin, considered by Amnesty International to be the youngest prisoner of conscience, was released after five days of detention. On 3 December 1999, a

Special Court sentenced Daw Shwe Bo and Ma Khin Khin Leh to life imprisonment under the 1950 Emergency Provisions Act and the 1908 Unlawful Associations Act. According to the Amnesty International, these two laws are frequently used to imprison people for their peaceful political activities. Defendants are usually not represented by a lawyer and have little or no opportunity to speak in court. In January 2000, Daw Shwe Bo and Ma Khin Khin Leh were transferred to an unknown location. Their current status is unknown.

Relevant Human Rights Standards:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations without dissent on 10 December 1948)

Article 3 Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 5 No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 9 No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10 Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 19 Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20: (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.

Article 21: (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

Sources of information for this case include: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, United States Department of State, and the Free Burma Coalition)

Recommended action:

Please send telegrams, faxes, airmail letters or emails:

Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Daw May Win Myint and Daw San San, who are being held for the peaceful exercise of their freedom of expression and association;

Requesting that the location of Daw Shwe Bo and Ma Khin Khin Leh be made known to their families;

Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Daw Shwe Bo and Ma Khin Khin Leh, who are being held for the peaceful exercise of their freedom of expression and association.

Appeal and inquiry messages should be sent to:

Senior General Than Shwa
Chairman
State Peace and Development Council
c/o Director of Defense Services Intelligence (DDSI)
Ministry of Defense
Signal Pagoda Road
Dagon Post Office
Yangon
Union of Myanmar
Faxes: 011 95 1 229 50
Salutation: Dear General

Copies sent to:

His Excellency U Tin Winn
Ambassador of the Union of Myanmar to the United States
Embassy of the Union of Myanmar
2300 S Street, NW
Washington, DC 20008
Fax: 202 332 9046
Salutation: Your Excellency

Please send copies of your appeals, and any responses you may receive, or direct any questions you may have to Victoria Baxter,

AAAS Science and Human Rights Program, 1200 New York Ave, NW, Washington, DC 20005; tel. 202-326-6797; email vbaxter@aaas.org; or fax 202-289-4950.

The keys to effective appeals are to be courteous and respectful, accurate and precise, impartial in approach, and as specific as possible regarding the alleged violation and the international human rights standards and instruments that apply to the situation. Reference to your scientific organization and professional affiliation is always helpful. To ensure that appeals are current and credible, please do not continue to write appeals on this case after 90 days from the date of the posting unless an update has been issued.