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Myanmar: End relentless crackdown on student protesters

One year after police violently dispersed largely peaceful student protests in Myanmar, the authorities continue their relentless crackdown on student activists and anyone associated with their movement. In the past two months, at least eight student union leaders, protesters and supporters have been arrested or face new charges. Scores of others remain in detention while on trial facing politically motivated charges because of their involvement in largely peaceful student protests, which ended in a violent police crackdown in the town of Letpadan, Bago Region, on 10 March 2015.

Amnesty International urges the Myanmar authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all student protesters and their supporters solely detained for their peaceful activities related to the student protests. In addition, we call on the Myanmar authorities to also drop all charges pending against those individuals still detained as well as those released on bail.

FRESH CHARGES

On 24 February 2016, 88 Generation Peace and Open Society member, and former prisoner of conscience, **Nilar Thein** was arrested and charged with protesting without prior permission under Section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act for her role in a peaceful protest in Yangon on 15 February 2015. The demonstration was in support of protesting students. It was not until almost a year later, on 11 February 2016 that the authorities issued a warrant for her arrest. She is currently detained in Yangon's Insein prison, having chosen not to submit a request for bail.

Also in February, the authorities filed multiple additional charges against student union leaders **Phyoe Phyoe Aung**, **Lin Htet Naing** and **Nandar Sitt Aung** for participating in unauthorized peaceful protests against the National Education Law at the end of 2014 and early 2015. The three are already in detention. If convicted they already face years of imprisonment for their role in organizing other protests on 10 March 2015 in the cities of Letpadan and Yangon.

In January 2016, four students who led a peaceful demonstration in Mandalay Region to mark one year since the start of large scale student marches against the National Education Law were also charged under Section 18 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Act.

The recent arrests and charges brought against student leaders, protesters and supporters are a worrying reminder that police in Myanmar can, and will, use repressive laws to arrest, detain and prosecute peaceful activists for political purposes. Although a new government is due to come to power at the beginning of April, under Myanmar's 2008 Constitution control of the Myanmar Police Force and the administration of justice will remain under the power of the military.

ONE YEAR ON, SCORES DETAINED WITH NO END IN SIGHT

A year after their arrest, 45 student protesters remain in detention in Tharawaddy prison while their trial is ongoing. They face years of imprisonment for their participation in the Letpadan protest on 10 March 2015. In addition, six student union members who protested against the crackdown later that day in Yangon continue to face charges for their role in the protest. Three of them are detained in Yangon's Insein prison. Two more student activists are being detained in Myingyan prison in Mandalay Region, while their hearings are ongoing.

Their prolonged detention is in violation of their right to personal liberty and to be tried without undue delay, a key component of the right to a fair trial, which is enshrined in Article 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

In addition, Amnesty International notes that, one year later, the authorities in Myanmar have yet to fully undertake an independent, impartial and thorough investigation into allegations of excessive use of force by police on 10 March 2015 in Letpadan. The organization reiterates its call on the Myanmar authorities to conduct such an investigation, and to ensure that those suspected of responsibility are brought to justice in trials which meet international standards of fairness.

BACKGROUND

The National Education Law was enacted in September 2014. Since then, students, their leaders and supporters have been calling for the law to be amended as they say it restricts academic freedoms. In February 2015, student groups organized four concurrent marches of protesters throughout the country, which were to meet in Yangon, the country's main city. However, they suspended the march as their representatives started negotiations with the government and Parliament on amendments to the law. As the talks broke down in early March 2015, student protesters in Letpadan, Bago Region, announced that they would resume marching towards Yangon. However, they were blocked by police, leading to an eight-day standoff between the students and the police.

The stand-off ended when, on 10 March 2015, police forcibly dispersed the student protesters. Eyewitnesses told Amnesty International that when some protesters tried to dismantle a police barrier, police began beating protesters, including some who had fallen to the ground, with batons. Over 100 student protesters, leaders and their supporters were arrested that day and 81 of them were charged with a range of criminal offences. To date Amnesty International is not aware of any police officers being brought to justice for human rights abuses.
