

Human Rights Watch

Torture, Former Combatants, Political Prisoners, Terror Suspects, & Terrorists

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Planned 2010 Elections Not Credible if Opposition Remains in Prison

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(Washington, DC) - Burma's military government has more than doubled the number of political prisoners in the past two years, including more than a hundred imprisoned in recent months, Human Rights Watch said today in a new report. Sentenced to long prison terms for their involvement in peaceful demonstrations in 2007, and for assisting civilians in the wake of the devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008, the political prisoner population has reached more than 2,200.

The 35-page report, "[Burma's Forgotten Prisoners](#)," showcases dozens of prominent political activists, Buddhist monks, labor activists, journalists, and artists arrested since peaceful political protests in 2007 and sentenced to draconian prison terms after unfair trials. The report was released on September 16, 2009 at a Capitol Hill news conference hosted by Senator Barbara Boxer.

Human Rights Watch said that Burma's rulers should immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners in Burma if scheduled elections in 2010 are to have any credibility. "Burma's generals are planning elections next year that will be a sham if their opponents are in prison," said Tom Malinowski, Washington advocacy director at Human Rights Watch. "Despite recent conciliatory visits by UN and foreign officials, the military government is actually increasing the number of critics it is throwing into its squalid prisons."

The release of the report marks [the launch of "2100 by 2010."](#) Human Rights Watch's global campaign for the release of all political prisoners in Burma by the time of the 2010 elections.

"We named the campaign '2100 by 2010' in July - but since then, the number has grown to approximately 2250," said Malinowski. "The United States, China, India, and Burma's neighbors in Southeast Asia should make the release of all political prisoners a central goal of their engagement with Burma, and use every tool of influence and leverage they have to achieve it."

In a September 9 [letter](#) to US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Human Rights Watch called on the United States to complete its policy review on Burma and focus on the promotion of human rights through principled diplomacy, tougher financial sanctions, and additional but properly monitored humanitarian aid.

Political opponents, activists and others with the courage to speak out against military rule or criticize government actions or policies have been routinely locked up in Burma's prisons for years. There are 43 known prisons holding political activists in Burma, while more than 50 labor camps where prisoners are forced to perform hard labor.

Repression increased after the popular uprising led in part by monks in August and September 2007 was crushed by the government. Closed courts and courts inside prisons have held unfair trials and sentenced more than 300 political figures, human rights defenders, labor activists, artists, journalists, comedians, internet bloggers, and Buddhist monks and nuns to lengthy prison terms. Some prison terms have been for more than 100 years. The activists were mainly charged under provisions of Burma's archaic penal code that criminalizes free expression, peaceful demonstration, and forming of independent organizations. More than 20 prominent activists and journalists, including Burma's most famous comedian, Zargana, were arrested for having spoken out about obstacles to humanitarian relief following Cyclone Nargis, which struck Burma in May 2008.

The world was reminded of the brutality of the military government after the arrest, protracted and unfair trial and conviction of Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in August after an American intruder broke into her house. Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy party won the last Burmese elections in 1990, has been in prison or house arrest for 14 of the past 20 years.

"Gaining the release of Suu Kyi is important not just for her own well-being, but because it could facilitate a process that allowed the opposition to fully participate in elections and Burmese society," said Malinowski. "But Suu Kyi is not the only person facing

persecution for her political beliefs. People like the comedian Zargana, imprisoned for criticizing the government's pathetic response to Cyclone Nargis, or Su Su Nway, a brave woman activist who led street protests, also deserve the world's attention."

"Burma's Forgotten Prisoners" spotlights the cases of political prisoners including:

Human Rights Watch said that it is seriously concerned for the health of many prisoners held in remote facilities with poor medical and sanitation conditions. The Burmese government should immediately permit the resumption of International Committee of the Red Cross visits to prisons to assist those in custody, and grant access to other independent humanitarian organizations. The government should also end its disgraceful and punitive practice of transferring prisoners to remote areas, placing a huge burden on family members to visit and provide urgently needed medicine and food.

"Instead of being persecuted and imprisoned, people like Zargana, U Gambira, Su Su Nway and Min Ko Naing should be allowed to help their country," said Malinowski. "When visiting Burma, foreign officials should ask not just to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi, but with other Burmese political activists in prison to solicit their views and show support for their courageous and important work."

Human Rights Watch said that during this critical period, the Burmese government's friends such as China, India, Japan, Russia, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), members of the UN Security Council, the UN secretary-general, and others should use their influence to press for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners.

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