



Amnesty International

Orange County

GROUP 141 ORANGE • GROUP 175 LONG BEACH
GROUP 178 IRVINE • GROUP 596 HUNTINGTON BEACH

November 2008

<http://www.aiusaoc.org>

Harsh Sentences for Myanmar Dissidents

This article is from a November 13, 2008 AIUSA press release.

Fourteen dissidents, who took part in the 2007 anti-government demonstrations in Myanmar, were sentenced to 65 years' imprisonment each on Tuesday, November 11. The sentences were handed down at a closed-door hearing in Yangon's Insein prison. On the same day the authorities sentenced another 27 people for their protest activities.

Three of those sentenced are Min Zeya, Kyaw Min Yu (also known as Ko Jimmy), and Ko Jimmy's wife, Nilar Thein. They are prominent 88 Generation Students group leaders—former student activists who spearheaded the pro-democracy uprising in Myanmar 20 years ago.

They were sentenced for their involvement in the 2007 demonstrations, popularly known as the "Saffron Revolution". These protests began on August 19, 2007 as small-scale marches against sudden state-imposed fuel price rises, but quickly grew in size and significance. Later tens of thousands of protesters added calls for the release of all political prisoners and demanded an end to the long-standing political impasse through a process of national reconciliation. The authorities brought the protests to an end with a violent crackdown in late September 2007.

"In the midst of its so-called 'Roadmap to Democracy', the government of Myanmar reveals its true intentions by sentencing these dissidents for nothing more than peacefully expressing their views during last year's demonstrations," said Benjamin Zawacki, Amnesty International's Myanmar researcher.

The sentences are a clear example that Myanmar's military government is ignoring calls by the international community to clean up its human rights record. They also belie the government's claims that its new constitution and plans for elections in 2010 are genuine efforts toward increasing political participation.

Also sentenced on November 11 was labor activist Su Su Nway, who was sentenced to 12 years and six months' imprisonment for her role in last year's demonstrations. The day before, blogger Nay Phone Latt, received a jail term of 20 years and six months for, among other offences, showing disrespect for Senior General Than Shwe in his blog.

More than 2,100 political prisoners are currently behind bars in Myanmar. At least another 23 members of the 88 Generation Students group are on trial in Myanmar, including prominent dissidents Min Ko Naing, Htay Kywe, and Ko Ko Gyi. They are expected to be sentenced soon.

"These sentences and the ongoing trials should disabuse

anyone of the notion that the Myanmar government has any intention of honouring its assurances to the United Nations that it would improve its human rights record and increase political participation. It knows only repression," said Benjamin Zawacki.

President-Elect Obama: 100 Days to Demonstrate Commitment to Human Rights

The attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, were a crime against humanity. Since then, the U.S. government has committed grave human rights violations in the name of countering terrorism.

Suspects have been abducted and covertly transported to secret U.S.-run facilities or transferred to the custody of other governments where they have faced torture. Individuals have been victims of enforced disappearance. Some remain unaccounted for. Hundreds of people have been unlawfully detained in conditions that have amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment at the Guantánamo Bay detention facility.

U.S. officials have effectively admitted that the U.S. government has used torture and other ill-treatment and have reserved the right to do so again.

The response of the U.S. government to the public exposure of these human rights violations has been plainly inadequate, and at worst it has amounted to helping perpetrators go unpunished for crimes under international law.

Amnesty International urges U.S. President-elect Barack Obama to make human rights central to his new administration. The organization is calling for certain concrete steps in his first 100 days in office that would demonstrate a genuine commitment to bringing the United States into line with its international obligations. The new president will have the authority to rectify some of the unlawful policies and practices adopted during his predecessors term in office in the name of counter-terrorism and national security. In the first 100 days, Amnesty International is calling on the new administration to:

- announce a plan and date to close Guantánamo;
- issue an executive order to ban torture and other ill-treatment, as defined under international law;
- ensure that an independent commission to investigate abuses committed by the US government in its "war on terror" is set up. These demands are part of a "checklist" of actions Amnesty International is asking the new US President to take during the first 100 days in office.

October Meeting Minutes

Group #175 Long Beach

Group News

- We will miss Linda Veazey, who quickly headed off to University of Texas at Houston to be a postdoc in the Women's Studies department. She is teaching and doing research. Congratulations and best wishes. Linda will still be on the resolutions committee so you can catch up with her at the next Annual General Meeting.
- We welcomed Mena to our group. She told us about her visits to Iran and her viewpoint of the current situation there.
- Walk for Hope: Thank you to Angelique, Elizabeth, Lizette, Naomi, and Norma (and Jacques from the Irvine group) for staffing the Amnesty table. It was a wonderful day and we received about \$13 in donations, which helped pay the postage for the letters we sent. Thanks to Lizette for bringing refreshments to inspire donations. And thanks for her postage donations!

Death Penalty News

Mary Kay shared some articles with us. Death Penalty Focus Board Member Stephen Rohde wrote about a new report that finds California's death penalty system "dysfunctional" and "close to collapse." The independent, nonpartisan California Commission on the Fair Administration of Justice, following a four-year study, concluded that the death penalty system is "plagued with excessive delay in the appointments of counsel for direct appeals and habeas corpus petitions, and a severe backlog in the review of appeals and habeas petitions before the California Supreme Court. Ineffective assistance of counsel and other claims of constitutional violations are succeeding in federal courts at a very high rate." They also pointed out that "by conservative estimates, well over \$100 million is spent on capital punishment annually. The strain placed by these cases on our justice system, in terms of the time and attention taken away from other business that the courts must conduct for our citizens, is heavy."

Lest you think the Commission is made up of "the usual suspects," it is a 22-member group chaired by John K. Van de Kamp and included prosecutors, public defenders, law enforcement officials, academics, and others. Some of the Commission's recommended attempted reforms in the system passed by the legislature—namely addressing erroneous eyewitness identifications, false confessions, and testimony by in-custody informants—were vetoed by Governor Schwarzenegger. To read the article, go to <http://www.deathpenalty.org/article.php?id=275>.

In other death penalty news, in the case of Troy Davis, 7 of 9 eyewitnesses have changed their testimony. One of the two who hasn't is believed by many to be the actual killer. Current focus is on appealing to the governor of Georgia to commute Davis' sentence.

We then had a discussion about the death penalty. Deidre explained some reasons why the death penalty actually costs more than life in prison: usually on a death penalty case, the assistant DA or DA will try the case (costing more salary), there is extra security, there are automatic appeals, etc.

Burma/Myanmar

Jim reported that the case dossiers for Individuals at Risk (IAR) have not been put in the database yet. Once they are in, the information will only be available to country specialists, not general Amnesty members. It is widely believed that Aung San Su Kyi will be one of 15 selected priority cases in the IAR portfolio in the U.S.

October Meeting Minutes

Group #141 Orange

Letter-Writing

The group sent over 35 letters, mostly dealing with Darfur. These included letters to three financial institutions asking them to bring shareholder pressure on companies operating in Darfur to help alleviate the human rights crisis there. Other letters went President Bush asking him to make ending the crisis in Darfur one of his top priorities and to US Ambassador to the United Nations Zalmay Khalilzad thanking him for supporting the International Criminal Court's work on Darfur. Finally, the group sent two letters to U.S. Representative Dana Rohrabacher asking him to co-sponsor the International Violence Against Women Act to support House Resolution 1462, which aims to stop weapons transfers to Darfur.

Darfur Now Screening

Most of meeting was devoted to a showing of the documentary *Darfur Now*. The film examines the conflict by focussing on six individuals and their roles in the conflict. Luis Moreno-Ocampo, prosecutor for the International Criminal Court, works to collect evidence to use against the Sudanese authorities; Adam Sterling, a young American enraged by the lack of world response to the crisis, campaigns in California to pass legislation to force companies with interests in Sudan to divest; Pablo Recalde of the West Darfur World Food Program strives to provide food and save lives; Ahmed Mohammad Abakar, chief sheikh at a camp for displaced persons in Darfur, tries to rally his people; Hejewa Adam, a female rebel, trains to fight the Janjaweed; and actor-author Don Cheadle uses his celebrity (as well as George Clooney's) to raise public and official awareness of the situation.

UN Supports Work on Arms Trade Treaty

One hundred and forty-seven states voted overwhelmingly at the United Nations on October 31 to move forward with work on the main elements of an Arms Trade Treaty. Only two countries voted against—the USA and Zimbabwe.

"This big UN vote moves the world closer to an Arms Trade Treaty that could include respect for human rights at its heart," said Brian Wood from Amnesty International. "That is the only way such a treaty can really help stop the widespread carnage and abuse from armed violence. But there are still skeptics and opponents."

The Control Arms campaign, made up of Amnesty International, the International Action Network on Small Arms and Oxfam International, welcomed the vote but called for more urgency from states in moving the process forward to ensure a strong Treaty with international human rights law, international humanitarian law and sustainable development at its heart.

October Meeting Minutes

Group #178 Irvine

We welcomed a new member to our meeting in addition to our faithful returning members.

Letter-Writing

We wrote letters relating to the documentary showing at our meeting. Specifically, we wrote letters protesting a court order in Turkey closing Lambda Istanbul, an LGB solidarity organization; and to Lithuania asking the government to respect the right to peaceful freedom of assembly for all and to promote respect for diversity.

Announcements

We talked about the resolutions that are going to be presented at the Western Regional Conference in Pasadena on 7-9 November 2008 and instructed our group representative, Julie N., on how the group feels so that she can appropriately represent us with the group voting card. Unfortunately Julie could not get the time off from work so Jacques K. represented the group instead.

Documentary Showing

We had a Dangerous Living house party as mentioned at the AIUSA website and watched the documentary *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World*, described as "the first documentary to deeply explore the lives of GLBT people in non-western cultures. The crew of Dangerous Living traveled to five continents to tell the heartbreaking and triumphant stories of these incredible individuals on film. [It] examines the struggles and triumphs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people in the Global South."

Action File

We discussed our prisoner of conscience case. Our new member was surprised that we had not mentioned him during the meeting. She thought that this was the main purpose of a local group. We discussed the change in focus to campaign work in addition to action files, but decided that at the next meeting we will devote time to discussing our disappearance case in Syria.

Upcoming Events

Change in date of November meeting: Now that our meetings have switched from the last Tuesday to the last Thursday of the month, our November meetings will often conflict with the Thanksgiving holiday. In 2008 we will move the meeting from the last Thursday of November to the first Thursday in December. We will discuss at the next meeting whether to make this change permanent; we never meet at the end of December anyway because of the end-of-year holidays.

Fighting in Democratic Republic of Congo Causes Humanitarian Tragedy

Fighting continues on several fronts in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo despite a unilateral ceasefire declared by the armed group, the National Congress for the Defense of the People (CNDP), on October 29. The CNDP's offensive in October forced a routed government army and hundreds of thousands of civilians down roads towards the provincial capital, Goma.

More than 250,000 people have so far fled the ongoing violence, bringing the total number of displaced people in the province to at least 1.2 million and possibly higher. Most are now living in displaced camps in the narrow belt of land that is still under government control around Goma.

"A human rights and humanitarian tragedy is underway in North Kivu province, but the UN Security Council, the European Union and African Union are sitting on their hands," said Andrew Philip, Amnesty International's researcher on Democratic Republic of Congo. "They have so far failed to give the UN peacekeeping force, MONUC, the reinforcements and equipment it needs to provide effective protection to civilians."

Conditions in the camps are said to be disastrous. New camps, many without latrines, potable water and shelters are still springing up. Some camps are within a few hundred metres of the front lines.

The human rights situation is no less deadly. Amnesty International continues to receive daily reports of other war crimes and serious human rights abuses. Widespread abductions of children for use as child fighters, as well as rapes and killings of civilians, are ongoing.

The crisis has unleashed a wave of high-level diplomatic activity, including a regional African Heads of State summit, chaired by the UN Secretary-General, to address the crisis, and missions by UN and AU Special Envoys as well as by senior US and EU politicians.

"But these diplomatic coming and goings have so far saved not one life; have opened up not one road for much-needed humanitarian aid," said Andrew Philip. "Many governments have expressed support for reinforcing MONUC, but so far the Security Council has not authorized deployment of the additional troops and specialist personnel and equipment MONUC says it needs.

Amnesty International is urging the international community to make no more excuses, reinforce MONUC now, create safe corridors for humanitarian aid throughout North Kivu, and put concerted international pressure on the fighting forces to halt all human rights abuses.

If you would like to continue receiving this newsletter and supporting the work of the Orange County and Long Beach Amnesty International groups, please return this coupon to the address shown with annual dues of \$10.00. Dues cover the costs of this newsletter and of stamps used for saving lives. Your address label contains your membership expiration date. Join us!

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Please make your check payable to Amnesty International. Contributions to AI are tax-deductible. Thank you for your interest and support!

Calendar November

19 Wednesday 7:00 PM

Group #175 Long Beach Monthly Meeting at the Unitarian Universalist Church, Rooms 1 and 2, 5450 Atherton Street, Long Beach. Letter-writing from 7:00-7:30. For further information about the group, contact Norma Edwards at (562) 425-4353.

Group #596 Huntington Beach is not meeting this month

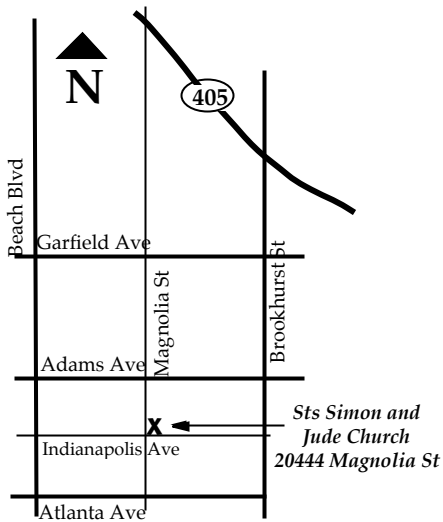
25 Tuesday 7:00 PM

Group #141 Orange Monthly Meeting at the Sisters of St. Joseph, 480 S. Batavia Street, in Orange. Look for the classroom/auditorium building behind the main building. Drive around on the south side of main building and park in the back. Look for the signs for the classroom number. For further information about the group, contact Kevin Gaffney at xhuskr@aol.com.

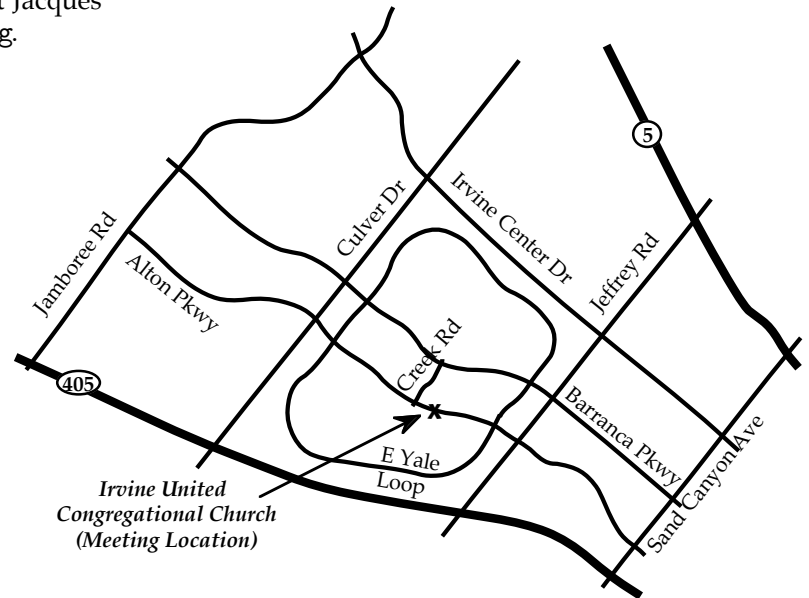
December

4 Thursday 7:30 PM

Group #178 Irvine Monthly Meeting at the Irvine United Congregational Church, 4915 Alton Parkway, Irvine. See details on the web page <http://www.aiusaoc.org>. For more information about the group, contact Jacques Kilchoer at jacques.kilchoer@aiusaoc.org.



Group #596 Huntington Beach Location



Group #178 Irvine Meeting Location

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