

AI INDEX: ASA 36/5/96
2 JULY 1996

SINGAPORE: AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL CONDEMNS IMPRISONMENT OF 72-YEAR-OLD WOMAN FOR POSSESSION OF BANNED RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

Amnesty International strongly condemned today's imprisonment of a 72-year-old grandmother for owning four prohibited books of the banned Jehovah's Witnesses religious group.

"Yu Nguk Ding's imprisonment is a travesty of justice," Amnesty International said today. "The Singapore authorities should release her immediately and unconditionally and should stop persecuting the Jehovah's Witnesses for exercising their peaceful religious beliefs."

Yu Nguk Ding, a former nurse and Jehovah's Witness for more than 40 years, began a one-week prison sentence today after refusing on conscientious grounds to pay a fine of 700 Singapore dollars (about 500 US dollars) for her conviction under Singapore's Undesirable Publications Act. She had faced a maximum sentence of two years in prison.

This is believed to be the second time Yu Nguk Ding has served time in prison for her religious conviction. She was reportedly sent to prison for five days in April after being convicted on a similar charge of possession of illegal literature.

Since November 1995 more than 60 Jehovah's Witnesses have been convicted of membership of an illegal society or possession of banned literature. All were sentenced to fines but most were then imprisoned for up to four weeks after refusing to pay the fines on conscientious grounds.

The series of trials followed raids by the police in February 1995 on several Jehovah's Witnesses' homes. Scores of people were held overnight for interrogation after being denied access to legal representatives and reportedly deprived of sleep. A number of teenagers in the group were also refused permission to inform their parents that they had been detained for questioning.

Amnesty International has just received disturbing reports that one Jehovah's Witness couple, who have already served four weeks in prison for holding bible meetings in their home, have been informed that their home will be confiscated if they allow it to be used for "unlawful activity" again.

Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses who are peacefully practising their chosen religion are being persecuted by the Singapore authorities on the grounds that they pose a threat to national security.

"Freedom of religion is a fundamental human right, guaranteed by the Singapore Constitution," Amnesty International said. "All those Jehovah's Witnesses who are imprisoned are prisoners of conscience and should be released immediately."

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Jehovah's Witnesses are believed to number about 2,000 in Singapore and have existed in the city-state since the 1940s. In 1972 the group was banned by the authorities on the grounds that they were prejudicial to public welfare and order. All literature of the Jehovah's Witnesses Watch Tower Society was also banned. The ban is believed to be based on the Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal on religious grounds to perform the two-year military service, which is compulsory for all male citizens of Singapore.

More than 100 conscientious objectors to military service -- including around 30 currently serving sentences -- have been detained and court-martialled since 1973. Those who refuse to comply with military orders are sentenced to an initial 12 or 15 months' detention in military barracks. A second refusal to comply results in a further two years in detention.

Amnesty International considers all those Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned for the peaceful expression of their religious beliefs or for their refusal on religious grounds to perform military service to be prisoners of conscience and continues to call for their immediate and unconditional release.
ENDS/