

Service 091/99

AI INDEX ASA 16/10/99

FOR RELEASE AT 0001 GMT 13 MAY 1999

Myanmar: ASEAN Labour Ministers meet where forced labour is commonplace

The on-going Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Labour Ministers' meeting in Myanmar should focus attention on the Burmese military's use of forced labour and repression of trade union rights, Amnesty International said today.

Thousands of people from ethnic minorities are used as forced labour by the Burmese military. Trade union rights are also non-existent in Myanmar. Yet the ten ASEAN governments have agreed that Yangon, the capital, is a suitable venue for its labour ministers to meet between 10-15 May.

"ASEAN government ministers are meeting to discuss labour issues in a country where thousands of people are routinely seized and forced to work against their will and trade unionists are jailed," Amnesty International said.

"The time has come for ASEAN to live up to the promise it made when admitting Myanmar in 1997 to lead efforts for change in that country."

"ASEAN member nations must use this opportunity to put pressure on the Burmese authorities by raising the issue of forced labour and the rights of trade unionists."

The State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), Myanmar's military government, routinely forces members of the Shan, Karen, and Karenni ethnic minorities to "contribute" their labour -- which in practice means working for free -- to build so-called "development projects". Many must spend so much of their time working for the military that they cannot support themselves and their families.

Earlier this year, Amnesty International interviewed over 100 ethnic minority civilians who had fled from Myanmar to Thailand. Almost all reported that Burmese troops had forced them to clear forests, build roads and military barracks, and even cultivate crops to feed the military.

Free trade unions do not exist in Myanmar, and several trade union activists are serving long sentences for their political and labour organizing activities. Than Naing, a labour leader and possible prisoner of conscience, has been imprisoned for over ten years by the Myanmar military government.

During the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, Than Naing took a leading role in forming national general strike committees in protest at 26 years of one-party military rule. These strike committees were violently suppressed in September 1988, when the military reasserted its power and formed a new government.

Than Naing was arrested in the aftermath of the coup, and tried by military tribunal under summary provisions which fell far short of international fair trial standards. He was sentenced in October 1989 to life imprisonment, reportedly on charges of "encouraging, harbouring or comforting persons guilty of high treason."

“The case of Than Naing highlights the plight of all trade unionists in Myanmar, who are prevented from operating freely for fear of persecution,” Amnesty International said. “The international community -- including the ASEAN countries -- have a vital role to play by putting pressure on Burmese authorities to loosen curbs on trade unions and ending forced labour.”

Background

Forced labour in Myanmar is not a new phenomenon -- Amnesty International has documented the practice for over 10 years. During the last seven years the scale of forced labour has increased dramatically, involving hundreds of thousands of civilians, including criminal and political prisoners.

Yet the Burmese government claims that these civilians contribute their labour voluntarily as part of their civic duty, an assertion which is contradicted by the hundreds of forced labourers who have given testimonies to Amnesty International. A 15-year-old Karenni girl said that after being forced to move at age 13, she could no longer attend school and had to work for the military instead. She was forced more times than she could count to cut grass and carry heavy stones for road-building.

Another form of forced labour is forced portering, which occurs in the context of counter-insurgency activities against armed ethnic minority opposition groups. SPDC troops simply take civilians from their villages and make them carry heavy loads of supplies and ammunition through mountainous jungle. They are often tied up and guarded at night, are never paid, and are given very little food. Porters are often beaten if they become too weak to carry their loads and cannot keep up with the military column.

One Shan farmer who sought refuge in Thailand told Amnesty International that he had been taken as a porter in October 1998 and forced to carry ammunition. Because he was given so little food, he became weak and could no longer walk. A soldier slapped him across the face several times, catching his finger in the porter's left eye. The porter managed to escape but has permanently lost his sight in that eye.

Myanmar ratified the Forced Labour Convention in 1955, but has continually flouted its provisions. Several years ago the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) filed a complaint against Myanmar about its widespread use of forced labour.

As a result the International Labour Organization established a Commission of Inquiry in June 1996. In a comprehensive report published in August 1998 the Commission found Myanmar's government "... guilty of an international crime that is also, if committed in a widespread or systematic manner, a crime against humanity".

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