



Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)

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Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)

and

Former Political Prisoners Society (FPPS)

Documentation Project Interim Report: February 2015



Initial Findings of the Documentation Project

Executive Summary

To date, government efforts to assist former political prisoners (FPPs) to acclimatize and reintegrate into society have been largely nonexistent in Burma. The effects of this inaction have, and continue to be hugely detrimental for the FPPs, their families, and for transitional justice efforts in the country. This inaction has become even more pressing since the government of Burma began releasing hundreds of political prisoners¹ in a wave of amnesties following the 2011 political reforms.

There are between 7,000 and 10,000 former political prisoners residing inside Burma, however very little is known regarding their current economic and social status, nor is there comprehensive data concerning their experiences inside the prison system. From March 2014 to date, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)'s Documentation Project, with

¹ Please refer to AAPP's [official definition and criteria](#) of a political prisoner

the support of the Former Political Prisoners Society (FPPS), has been implementing an ongoing and vast data collection process both inside Burma and along the Thai-Burma border. The data collection aims to address three purposes: to collect census data of the FPPs that participated in the surveying; to understand the extent of the torture and mistreatment they faced whilst in prison; and to conduct a thorough needs assessment of the FPP population to provide the empirical basis for future interventions and rehabilitation programs.

The Documentation Project seeks to conclude with the release of two final and comprehensive publications based on the entire data collection in the first half of 2015: on the systematic use of torture and mistreatment of political prisoners; and on identifying needs of former political prisoners and building the case for reparations as key to transitional justice in Burma.

This report aims to provide an overview of the Documentation Project to date. The first section describes the methodology of the data collection, entry and cleaning process; the second section reveals the initial findings of the data analysis; and the third and final section outlines the next steps of the Documentation Project.

Methodology

The University of California Irvine (UCI)'s School of Law International Justice Clinic assisted AAPP in developing a methodology for surveying FPPs in Burma based on a combination of interviews with FPPs in Burma, and extensive research into methodologies used by researchers of FPPs in South Africa, Northern Ireland, the Czech Republic, Nepal, and Argentina. The survey, comprising of a combination of multiple choice and free response questions, focused on baseline demographic data; mental and physical health; educational needs; needs and aspirations; baseline economic data; and qualitative responses on post-release reintegration.

In March 2014, the data collectors began to administer the survey, utilizing various micro-networks of FPPs and other local partners to identify FPPs throughout Burma and along the Thai-Burma border. In April 2014, the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) conducted a training workshop in Rangoon for AAPP's data collectors on how to administer the survey to other FPPs. Data collection within Burma can prove to be difficult due to the lack of transparency from the government. AAPP therefore cooperates with other organizations such as FPPS, the 88 Generation Peace and Open Society, the National League for Democracy (NLD) and the Shan National League for Democracy, to assist with the data collection. This cooperation facilitates the compiling of a list of all political prisoners arrested in Burma since the 1962 military takeover. Nevertheless, gathering evidence of the experiences of these FPPs is difficult, due to the unwillingness of many individuals to discuss their past experiences as a result of the effects of the trauma they suffered or the fear of future repercussions. As such, AAPP ensures the data collection is transparent, introducing the Documentation Project to individuals and communities before collecting data on the FPPs.



A data collector explains the Documentation Project to FPPs in Kyaunggon

In areas where the data collectors were unable to administer the survey with the FPPs, surveys were distributed at collection points to be self-administered by the FPPs and returned back to AAPP. Family members filled in surveys on behalf of deceased FPPs. In total, approximately 5,000 surveys were distributed; thus far, AAPP has received back 2,849 surveys.



FPPs complete the surveys whilst the data collector looks on

The data collectors have now collected data in Burma from Rangoon and Dala in Rangoon Division; Pegu and Pyay in Bago Division; Laputta, Myaungmya, Eain Me, War Khe Ma, Kyaungkon, Kyonepyaw, Bassein and Bokalay in Irrawaddy Division; Pakokku and Mandalay in Mandalay Division; areas of the Kachin and Karen states; Yenangyaung, Chauk, Kyauk Padaung, and Popa in Magwe Division; Meiktila and Mahlaing in Mandalay Division; Kyaukme, Hsipaw and Lashio Townships in Northern Shan State; and Thandwe, Gwa, Tauunggup and Kyeintali in Rakhine State. Data has also been collected from locations along the Thai-Burma border, including in and around Mae Sot, and at Mae La, Umphium and Nupo refugee camps.

From April 2014 onwards, data entry officers in the AAPP Rangoon office have been entering the data from the collected surveys into Martus, a secure information collection and management database that enables NGOs to catalogue and store information on human rights abuses. After a number of small errors were found in the data entry and translation from Burmese into English, the process was amended; the data entry is double-checked after being entered, and then sent to our Data and Research Consultant for a final clean. Whilst this has slowed down the Documentation Project, it ensures that the data is input to a high standard and any conclusions drawn from it are thus reliable.

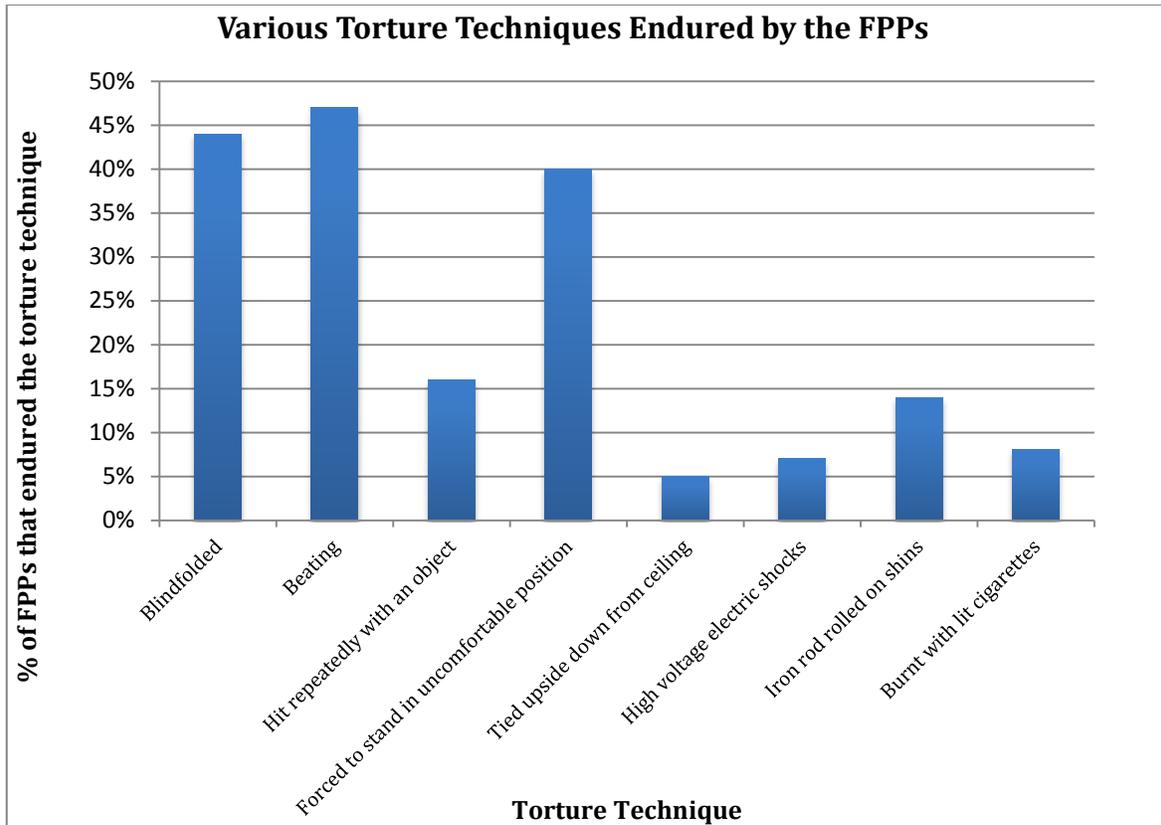
Initial Findings

The following section outlines key findings from the first stages of the data analysis of the 430 surveys that have completed the cleaning process. Out of the 430 surveys, 46 were filled in by relatives of the deceased FPP, thus 384 were filled in by the FPP themselves. Initial analysis of the 430 surveys have already provided AAPP with a comprehensive insight into human rights violations incurred whilst in prison, and an idea of the extensive difficulties the FPPs are facing post-release. It is clear that hundreds, and likely thousands, of FPPs in Burma continue to suffer from the physical, emotional, and financial damage caused by imprisonment and torture by the Government of Burma.

Mistreatment in Prison and Subsequent Medical Conditions

An overwhelming majority of the FPPs revealed to AAPP experiences of enduring various forms of torture while in prison; of those that responded to the question, 74% of respondents reported having been subject to physical torture, whilst 76% reported having been subject to mental torture. In the survey, FPPs were able to select from a comprehensive checklist of various forms of torture (see Figure 1 below for some of the techniques in the checklist).

Figure 1:



The findings thus far have indicated to AAPP the systematic use of an extensive array of torture methods during the interrogation process. Other violations during incarceration included incommunicado and secret detention, deprivation of food, water, and sleep, verbal and sexual abuse and the denial of medical treatment. Several of the deceased FPPs died in prison as a result of the wounds inflicted upon them whilst being tortured and the subsequent denial of treatment. Of the 46 deceased FPPs, eight died in prison or detention.

A major violation of their human dignity that many of the FPPs identified as suffering was their dehumanization and treatment as “animals”. This included being denied access to basic hygiene such as use of the toilet and shower facilities. One FPP identified having to drink the water from the pipe in the toilets on the rare occasions that he was permitted to go, as he was consistently denied water. The squalid conditions that the FPPs were forced to live in greatly contributed to a myriad of illnesses and infectious diseases including diarrhea, hepatitis, typhoid and tuberculosis.

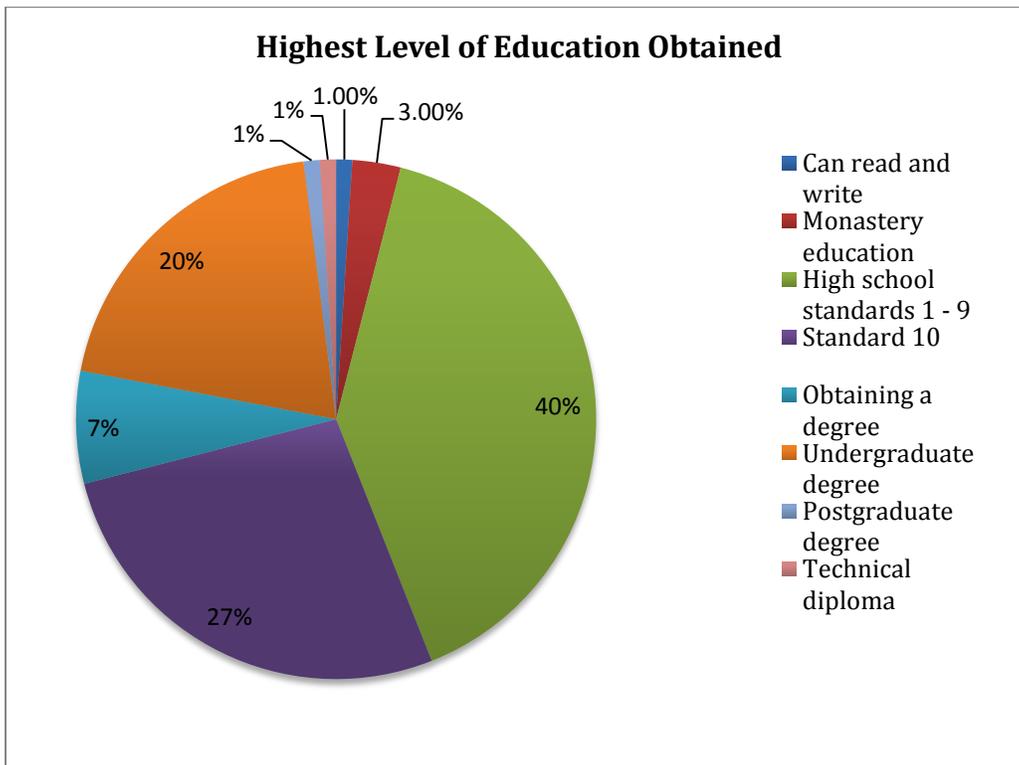
Prevalent ailments afflicting the FPPs since their release and as a result of their incarceration and mistreatment include, hypo- and hypertension; problems with eyesight; heart disease; various aches and pains - most commonly chest and back pains; and anxiety. A large number of FPPs identified suffering from paralysis, caused by torture and mistreatment, and from

sleeping on a cement floor for a prolonged period – it was only after 2007 that prisons provided wooden pallets as beds. The majority of the FPPs that have thus far participated in AAPP’s data collection have yet to receive adequate, or any medical attention to treat the physical and mental injuries they obtained whilst in prison.

Employment & Education

Prior to their arrest and imprisonment, many of the FPPs had obtained a high level of education (see Figure 2 below), and were active participants in society. Of the initial 430 FPPs, 26% indicated that they had completed high school to Standard 10 and a further 3% had completed education within a monastery. An additional 21% had completed an undergraduate degree or diploma, and a further 2% had completed a post-graduate degree. In addition, another 7% of the FPPs were in the process of obtaining a degree at the time of their arrest. Prior to their imprisonment, several of the FPPs reported that they had been in secure and well-paid professions, including law, medicine, dentistry, banking, engineering, accountancy and teaching.

Figure 2:



However, despite this, the greatest barrier to successfully reintegration for FPPs in Burma is a lack of gainful employment opportunities. Whilst the majority of FPPs are in some form of employment – only 18% of the 384 FPPs indicated they were currently unemployed – 75% of those employed revealed they do not receive sufficient income. Post-release, many of the FPPs face legal and social barriers to certain types of employment - many have been barred from re-entering their former professions, or their status as a FPP is a deterrent to potential employers. Many FPPs described their struggle to find employment that generates sufficient income due to their perceived status as a FPP, and that employers were anxious about the ramifications of hiring or being associated with them. As such, the main sources of employment for FPPs in Burma are low-skilled, casual jobs such as farm and manual laborers, which fail to generate adequate and regular income. More often than not, the FPPs are over qualified for these jobs but have very limited options.

Severe physical injuries sustained from torture and left untreated mean that many of the FPPs are physically unable to work. Several FPPs report they currently experience psychological issues, including depression, which prohibit them from functioning in a workplace environment. Half of the FPPs who responded report that they have lingering mental or physical trauma related to their imprisonment that has not yet been addressed.

In addition, for many of those FPPs that were imprisoned whilst in the process of obtaining further qualifications, they have been denied the opportunity to continue their education by the authorities and thus have been unable to complete their studies.

Financial Hardship

The effects of imprisonment on the financial status of the FPPs and their families have been disastrous. For many families, the FPP was the principal breadwinner, with 74% responding that their families were financially dependent on them. During their imprisonment, the FPPs' families suffered dearly from the loss of the FPP's salary - 86% of those surveyed suggested that their family's financial situation deteriorated and worsened as a result of their incarceration.

Almost half of the respondents stated that they currently suffer financial hardships due to the lasting effects of torture or prison conditions. In addition, a lack of employment opportunities for FPPs exacerbates the families' financial issues as the FPP becomes dependent on his/her relatives for subsistence. With 18% unemployed and relying on relatives, and 75% of those employed indicating they do not earn a sufficient income, many of the FPPs have problems meeting the subsistence needs of their families.

Social Exclusion

Social exclusion of political prisoners and their families is widespread. Several of the FPPs surveyed reported experiences of social exclusion of their families whilst they were in prison, and of continued disassociation with them and their families since their release due to the pervasive culture of fear. Whilst in prison they claim neighbors and friends refused to assist or interact with their families due to fear of reprisal. There are even instances whereby family members disassociated themselves when the FPP was imprisoned. Since their release, many FPPs disclosed experiences of continued social exclusion, either due to the fact that they had lost contact with friends, or because former friends and neighbors continued to maintain a distance out of fear.

Family Tensions

On their release, many FPPs with families reported having found that their family situation had changed drastically during their incarceration. Some responded that their spouses had remarried due to their long absence in prison. Others reported a breakdown of, or a separation from the family unit. Relationships may be difficult to reestablish and reintegration into the family after a long period of absence can be highly stressful for all involved. FPPs without families or friends with whom they can live with are released into a situation where they are essentially homeless and must seek refuge with fellow FPPs or in monasteries. A lack of housing is an immediate issue for FPPs and poses as a major barrier to their successful reintegration into society.

Next Steps

As the initial findings of the Documentation Project have revealed, FPPs in Burma are facing a number of problems that have arisen from their incarceration, ranging from health issues to socio-economic exclusion, that prevent them from fully reintegrating into society. These problems require both immediate and long-term attention and the final publications of the Documentation Project will seek to provide recommendations to address these issues.

The Documentation Project will conclude with two final reports, due to be released in the first half of 2015. The report on the systematic use of torture and mistreatment of political prisoners will evaluate FPPs' experiences inside prison and also reiterate the call for the Government of Burma to fulfill its commitment to signing the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT). The report on identifying needs of FPPs and building the case for reparations will provide concrete recommendations for reparations programs to the Government of Burma and build the case for reparations as key to transitional justice in Burma. The findings of the Documentation Project will also inform AAPP's future rehabilitation programs for FPPs.

