

THE TEN YEAR FIGHT FOR BURMA'S POLITICAL PRISONERS:

**A HISTORY OF THE ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATION
FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS (BURMA)**

(THE FIRST DECADE: 23 MARCH 2000 - 23 MARCH 2010)

“For those of us who share the experience of being a political prisoner, it creates an unbreakable bond between us. We heard each other’s screams under torture. We will never turn our backs on each other, or our friends and colleagues in prison. We will continue our work until they are all free”,

Bo Kyi

(former political prisoner and Joint-secretary of AAPP).

Prelude

During Burma's successive military regimes, the term political prisoner has been shrouded in controversy. In fact, the current military regime, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) denies their very existence, arguing that there are only criminals in Burma's prisons. In reality, there are more than 2,000 people behind bars, without access to the guarantees of due process, for exercising their basic civil and political rights. Following the pro-democracy demonstrations of 1988 and the ensuing crackdown, at least three thousand people were killed and thousands of people were arbitrarily arrested and detained for their involvement in the protests or their perceived opposition to the regime. By 1990, there was an estimated 3,000 political prisoners. Political prisoners are not unique to the SPDC period. People were imprisoned for their political beliefs well before the 1988 uprising. However, the SPDC's attempts to cut people off from politics, close off the country from external influences, and gain total control over the population, resulted in a dramatic increase in political prisoners. More and more people in Burma became interested in politics, their minds awakened by the 1988 pro-democracy uprising where hundreds of thousands of ordinary people took to the streets. As a result, more and more people were arrested and imprisoned for simply exercising their basic human rights and charged under oppressive and draconian laws and directives that criminalize peaceful dissent. Burma's political prisoners are a diverse and varied group: students calling for an independent student union; monks who overturn their alms bowls at the military's economic

mismanagement; poets and journalists writing about poverty or oppression; school teachers and mothers. What ties these people together is that they engage in activities the military regime considers contrary to its policies, and therefore 'anti-government'. In Burma, it does not take much to be considered 'anti-government' or a 'threat to national security', as the many faces of Burma's political prisoners testify.

Understanding the political prisoner situation in Burma is essential to understanding the political situation in the country more generally. Nothing is more revealing about the situation of human rights in a country than the existence of political prisoners. They embody the denial of the most basic freedoms essential to humankind, such as freedom of expression, assembly and association. The existence of political prisoners is one of the best indicators to evaluate how confident or insecure a government is; how accepted or threatened a regime is by the ordinary people. Political prisoners are also an indicator of how free a people are.

Throughout history, prisons have been used to punish those who offer a new vision for a fairer and just society, to remove political activists and leaders from their potential audiences, and to silence opinions different to the status quo.

As Russian novelist and former political prisoner, Fyodor Dostoyevsky aptly said, "the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons". In Burma, prisons reflect the contempt in which the regime holds its own people. The appalling conditions of detention are well documented. In Burma, torture is practiced systematically and poses an ongoing threat to civilians, ensuring populations live in fear, thereby preventing any politically critical activities. In Burma, the military regime routinely imprisons people who offer a new vision to their tyrannical rule but they do not stop there, they imprison family members of activists: parents, sisters, brothers, as well as neighbors and friends. Furthermore, those who support activists, who hide, feed, and provide for them, are also imprisoned.

Once released from prison, it does not stop there. Former political prisoners and their families face a range of repressive and arbitrary measures. These include close monitoring and surveillance, denial of passports, threats of re-arrest for those who continue to speak out on human rights or politics, and restrictions on movement.

The threat of imprisonment and the life threatening conditions that prisoners have to bear have a devastating effect on the willingness of people to engage in politics. They live in fear, which stifles dissent, prevents a vibrant civil society and halts any criticism of the regime; ultimately prohibiting a genuine democratic transition.

Given this situation, to encourage people to engage in politics is difficult, when the consequences are so severe: unlawful arrest, detention and torture. It is important, therefore, to speak of courage and sacrifice. There are many activists, who lead by example, showing bravery and defiance in the face of the regime's cruelty. They are arrested, imprisoned, released, and arrested again. They spend their lives in prison; some will die there. To lead with their hearts and not their swords that is what defines Burma's political prisoners. But what will the oppressors do when people no longer fear them or their repressive prisons? The principle of non-violence is one of the best ways for the people to fight against the military regime, defiant but not violent.

With this belief, former political prisoners established the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), also known as AAPP on March 23, 2000.

Now, a decade has passed.

Since its founding, AAPP has carefully documented the conditions of detention, torture and other rights violations of political prisoners. This information is then reported to the media and the international community through press releases, reports and interviews.

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in awareness of the political prisoner situation, at the international level. This has come about because of not only the work of groups like AAPP, but also because of political prisoners themselves; their own reputation, the sacrifices made and their bravery. Despite, increased awareness, the problem remains the same and more than 2000 political prisoners are languishing in Burma's jails.

We, the members of AAPP, would like to express our genuine desire.

In Burma, political prisoners exist because people are oppressed. AAPP exists because there are political prisoners in Burma. We are not happy that a decade later we are still here. Ideally, we would abolish AAPP today because there would be no need for AAPP. But as long as there is a need for AAPP, we will be here, until all political prisoners are released.

"Free all political prisoners. Free the people of Burma."

The Beginning

Since the coup in 1988, the military regime under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council; which later changed its name to State Peace and Development Council, has routinely arrested and imprisoned political activists and ordinary people for their opposition to the military regime and their support for human rights, democracy and national reconciliation. Later, many activists were punished with extremely long prison sentences, some as long as 104 years. All political activists who are arrested go through the interrogation centers, in which unimaginable torture is commonplace. Some political activists never made it to prison: they lost their lives in these places of interrogation. For political activists who survived the interrogation, they then faced long prison terms in appalling conditions. Stripped of their dignity and of their humanity they were denied their most basic human rights, not only the right to be free from torture and the right to a fair trial, but also the right to health, to food, and to adequate shelter.

In prison, daily life is difficult and the conditions life threatening. Prison authorities deliberately aggravate prison conditions and deny medical care to political prisoners, causing a level of suffering, amounting to torture. Malnutrition, poor sanitation and unclean water are serious problems throughout the prison system, posing a major health risk. Political prisoners receive very low quality food; often the food is rotten, half cooked, with

stones and insects, resulting in food poisoning and gastric ailments. Many prisoners face starvation and suffer from malnutrition related diseases. Thus, political prisoners had to survive on the food provided by family members such as dried or fried meat, fried fish paste and snacks. They also have to ask families for blankets, coats, clothing and plastic utensils while in prison. Later, because political prisoners were transferred to remote prisons, and because of economic hardship, many political prisoner families could not make regular prison visits and some political prisoner families were unable to visit their loved ones at all. However, the political prisoners who received family visits would always share what they had with their fellow political prisoners. A practice among political prisoners, which indicates the bond and love they have for each other; the instinct not only for their own survival but also for each other's.

After 1992, some political prisoners completed their prison terms and were released from prison. Knowing the suffering political prisoners were undergoing, many of those released began activities to support and protect their friends and colleagues still in prison, as a way of honoring their sacrifice and alleviating their pain. Some former political prisoners started fundraising activities at festivals, and collected donations from other former political prisoners. Some worked together and opened small businesses such as cafés, cold drink shops and pharmacies as a way of earning an income and fundraising for political prisoners in need. They made preserved food and delivered it to the prisons. They also provided needed items such as mosquito nets, blankets, clothes and toiletries for political prisoners.

After the 1996 December Student Movement, many former political prisoners were re-arrested, some went into hiding to evade arrests, and others fled to the border areas.

Political prisoners hungered for news from outside the prison walls. Desperate for information about political changes in Burma and the rest of the world, and denied any reading materials, they would request their family members: "If you can't bring food, that is ok, but bring news with you." They also wanted the outside world to know how political prisoners in Burma were suffering. Stripped of their rights they faced numerous violations. Before arrest, political prisoners were often active in their communities, politically engaged and well educated; they were teachers, union leaders, students, and doctors. Unable to connect with their people,

they were desperate to find a way to express their political beliefs and ideas.

With this knowledge in mind, following their release from prison, political prisoners would help their fellow political prisoners still behind bars, providing them assistance and a link to the outside world. On arrival at the Thai-Burma border, former political prisoners wanted everyone to know, not only what they had been through but also what their brothers and sisters were still going through in Burma's prisons. They realized that they could aid in their survival, alleviate some of their pain and act as their lifeline with the outside world. It was for these reasons that AAPP was established.

Former political prisoners, while staying at Thai-Burma border area, became increasingly involved in border activities, activities at the international level, as well as clandestine activities inside Burma. The purpose of this work was to raise awareness and funds to support political prisoners, and to raise awareness about the human rights situation in Burma, more generally, to the international community. It was no easy task and with more than 2000 political prisoners still behind bars, former political prisoners realized a coordinated and well managed effort was needed. Consequently, ten former political prisoners living on the Thai-Burma border established the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) Establishing Committee on 1 December 1999. On the 23 March 2000, the 11th anniversary of the arrest of student leader, Ko Min Ko Naing, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners was formally established.

Aims and Objectives of AAPP

1. To report on the number of political prisoners held in Burma, and on human rights violations carried out against them in various detention centers, prisons and labor camps.
2. To secure the support of governments and international organizations to pressure the Burmese military regime to stop the persecution, arrest and detention of political prisoners, and to release them all.
3. To provide political prisoners with necessities, such as food and medicine.
4. To protect political prisoners from harassment and intimidation by the military regime once released from prison, including when they are looking for employment, continuing their studies, associating with friends and colleagues, and to protect them from persecution if they resume their political activities.
5. To assist in the reconstruction of former political prisoners' lives, including both their mental and physical well-being.



Memoirs



Tate Naing
(Secretary)



The early years

It's been 10 years since the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) was established.

Every former political prisoner has one common feeling or desire. That is, to do something for colleagues and friends who are still behind bars. For that reason, AAPP has survived through a decade.

In general, there is a saying that for a person, the day they are released from prison is one of the happiest days of their life. That is not true for political prisoners from Burma. We are not happy when we are released from prison because many of our friends were left behind the prison walls.

Shortly after my release in 1992, I ran a pharmacy with Sithu and Soe Naing, in North Okkalapa Township, Rangoon. We opened the pharmacy to have an income but most importantly to provide medicine to our friends still in prison. That place became a gathering point for former political prisoners.

Another popular hangout for former political prisoners was the Pepsi Distribution shop at the corner of Panpingyi Road, Kyimyindine Township, run by Ko Thargyi (AAPP) in 1995 and 1996.

Later, with other former political prisoners with same heart, we held fundraising activities such as running shops. The main coordinator for those

activities was Ma Yee Yee Tun, who now lives in Norway. She initiated the fundraising, shopping, cooking and political prisoner visits. Many former political prisoners actively joined this movement.

Later, many of them were arrested in 1995 after attending the funeral of U Nu, former Prime Minister of Burma, and during the 1996 December Student Movement. Others went into hiding to evade arrest. I was one such former political prisoner. After hiding out for over 8 months I headed towards the Thai-Burma border in August 1997. For more than one year, I took refuge under the protection of some organizations, and helped them with their activities. Mostly, I stayed at the office of the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) in Chiang Mai and at the residence of writer, Christina Fink. Later, with the help of Ko Moe Thee Zun and Ko Naing Aung, I worked with the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF).

In June 1999, with Ko Aung Zaw (chief editor, Irrawaddy), Ko Min Zin (USA), Ko Thet (DVB), Ko Thar Nyunt Oo (VOA), and Ko Zaw Tun (AAPP), the Narathin (*Prison*) Association was established and with the help of individual donors, we managed to provide some financial support to political prisoners.

During that time, Ko San Tint (USA) visited the border area and stayed with us. Patricia from the Open Society Institute was collecting information about political prisoners in Burma. Her work was impressive and her documentation thorough so we decided to send Ko San Tint to work with her as an intern. I also learned a lot from her and her work was vital to the emergence of AAPP.

We realized the support Narathin Association provided to political prisoners was not enough. We needed to support political prisoners politically, morally, financially and also raise awareness with the international community about the sacrifice political prisoners were making. For this reason, the Organizing Committee of Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) was established on 1 December 1999 by former political prisoners living on the border.

At this time, Ko Bo Kyi arrived at the border and he was very interested in the movement and keen to get involved, so he became an important founder.

At the beginning, we faced financial difficulty, as organizations do. The office was opened at the house Ko Bo Kyi, Ko Min Zin and I lived, but

daily office expenses and daily living expenses for people became a headache for us, far from supporting political prisoners inside Burma. However, people who were working at AAPP received support from their mother organizations and from individual donors, so we survived.

After a year, AAPP received funding from a proper donor. The organizational expenses were covered and we could support some political prisoners, though our capacity was still limited. Later, we received more and more funders but still not enough financial support for all political prisoners in Burma.

It is not hard to start an organization but what is hard is to manage that organization in the long run. As is the nature of organizations, we also faced internal conflicts. However, at the end of the day, all AAPP members are committed to the main objectives of the organization so we overcame the difficulties.

There are over 100 AAPP members; only about 20 of these members are at the border area. Currently, there are former political prisoners from Burma living in many countries around the world. They also support political prisoners, former political prisoners and the families of political prisoners as much as they can from where they are, and this is something we are proud of.

I would like to thank all AAPP members and former political prisoners, who have been supporting political prisoners, working for their release, and all of those who support AAPP by collecting information on human rights violations inside Burma and sharing that information with us. Finally, I would like to pay my respects to all political prisoners who are still courageously fighting for the people of Burma.

As long as there are political prisoners in Burma, AAPP needs to exist. It is with this belief that AAPP went through a decade.



Bo Kyi
(Joint Secretary)

Reflections on **the beginnings of the AAPP**

The seeds of AAPP were planted many years ago, around 1992. After being released from prison, some activists began supporting those who were still inside. I, along with Ko Tate Naing, Ko Moe Myat Thu, Ma Yee Yee Tun, Ma Moe Kalyar Oo, Ma Aye Aye Moe (Sule), Ma Cho Nwe Oo, held fund raising activities, set up small businesses and provided political prisoners with the funds we made.

My freedom was short lived and I was arrested and imprisoned, for a second time, in 1994. This time they sentenced me to 5 years. I went from being one of the supporters to one of the supported.

In 1998, I was released from prison. A year later, in 1999, some of my colleagues were arrested for attempting to create the 9999 movement initiated by People Power 21, an organization based at the Thai-Burma border. Facing the threat of re-arrest, I made the difficult to decision to leave my country. I said good-bye to my mother knowing I would not see her again. With the help of my younger brother, I fled to the Thai Burma border in September 1999 and began life in exile.

On arrival, I stayed at a place in the Mae Sot Market for 20 baht a night. It was a simple life but a free one. While I did not have contacts with any organizations in Mae Sot, I did my best to find people I knew from Burma. Not long after, a friend Ko Thet Hmu, took me to meet Ko Moe Thee Zun at a teashop near the market.

Later, I came in contact with Ko Tate Naing and Ko Min Zin, former political prisoners, who I knew from Rangoon and they rented a house in Hua Phai village for the three of us to live.

At the time, Ko Tate and Ko Min Zin were away a lot in Chiang Mai. I was often alone in the house and I did not know where to go. I sometimes felt lost and lonely. Mobile phones and computers were limited in Thailand, especially in a place like Mae Sot. Ko Nyo from the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS) helped me when I didn't know where to go.

In time, I became acquainted with more and more people and I was lucky that I knew many activists along the border. It made adapting to life here a lot easier. My friendship with imprisoned student leader, Ko Min Ko Naing, earned me respect, as did my role as an English teacher. Some of my friends knew that I ran an English class in Burma, so they urged me to start classes in Mae Sot. I started teaching English to democracy activists working on the border. Later, I wrote a column for MoeJoe Journal, titled 'First-hand Prison Experiences.' Then, Ko Moe Thee, Ko Win Min and Ko Aung Moe Zaw introduced me to Western visitors and I became on familiar terms with an increasing number of people.

Life in Thailand as an exile presented many challenges. I didn't have any legal documents so, when I went out, I ran the risk of being stopped by the Thai police which happened most of the time. One occasion was particularly nerve wracking. I was in Chiang Mai for an education conference. The conference was raided by Thai police and immigration officials checked everyone for legal documents. Along with six others, I was arrested, as we did not have the requisite papers. Since we were from Mae Sot, we were transferred to the immigration lock-up there.

I laughed at my fate because I had spent the first night in Chiang Mai in a five star hotel and now I was locked up in a detention center by the river Thaung Yin (Moei River), sleeping on a concrete floor with my longyi (sarong) as a blanket. Luckily, the UNHCR negotiated with the Thai intelligence, reasoning that we could not be deported back to Burma as we faced definite imprisonment and torture. After much negotiation, we were dumped at a remote place on the Burmese side of the Moei River rather than being handed over to Burmese authorities. From there, we crossed the river back to the Thai side. This was the most scared I had felt since arriving in Thailand.

Whenever I think back on how the AAPP was established, the first thing that comes to mind is 'Narathein' and Ko Tate and Ko Min Zin. They ran 'Narathein', which supported political prisoners inside Burma by collecting money from friends abroad and contributions from Narathein members.

I heard they were considering establishing an association to not only support political prisoners but also to push for their release and document the abuses they

suffered at the hands of the regime, as former political prisoners are the best people to work for political prisoners. This made perfect sense to me, and I knew I had to be involved as the prison issue was the only thing I was familiar with.

The current AAPP office is the house Ko Tate, Ko Min Zin and I were living in before we established the AAPP. The first thing we did after deciding to found the AAPP was consult with former political prisoners along the Thai-Burma border. After we received their consent, we set up an organizing committee, though once the committee was established; we didn't have any computers or e-mail. The All Burma Federation of Student Unions-Foreign Affairs Committee (ABFSU-FAC) allowed us to use their computers and office phone. Ko Thar Nyunt Oo and Ko Zaw Tun from the ABFSU were also former political prisoners and members of the AAPP organizing committee. Some other organizations also allowed us to use their office facilities.

I remember that whenever we released media statements, I would wait at the ABFSU office in case the media called for an interview. Only after all possible interviews were done, would I go home. Even when I returned home, I needed to wait until the route was clear of the Thai police who patrolled the area. Back then, I did not have a car or bike and would have to wait for someone to give me a lift home.

After the organizing committee was established, the house we lived in became the office. We had our own computer donated by Ko Min Zin from Chiang Mai. I was much uninformed about technology. In Burma, I had never used a computer and I heard about e-mail only after my arrival in Mae Sot. It was incredibly frustrating learning everything from the beginning but I had to overcome these difficulties if the AAPP was to succeed.

In the beginning, we didn't have any funding so we were under the wing of some other organizations, unsure how we were going to survive. Slowly but surely we grew, gaining support from other organizations on the border.

Kelly Curri, the International Republican Institute and Christina Fink were among the people and organizations that helped us from the very beginning. They supported us with their own money, providing 5000 baht or sometimes 10,000 baht so that we could stay afloat. Other people who visited us also often donated money for the survival of the organization.

I didn't know anything about writing proposals so Ko Min Zin helped me but I didn't know who or where to send them. Later, we came to know Brian Joseph from National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which has been funding the AAPP since the beginning, and he told us to submit a proposal. Kelly is the one who finalized and

polished the proposal, brought it with her to discuss with NED. Then, the AAPP received \$40,000 in 2000 to run the office and to support political prisoners. This was our first real grant and an important step for us.

When we talk about the establishment of the AAPP, there are two colleagues we cannot forget to mention: Ko Zaw Win Lwin and Ko Kyaw Thura, who stayed with us at the AAPP office. They were responsible for the Supply Department of the All Burma Student Democratic Front (ABSDF). They were good at writing reports and proposals for funders and their English was better than mine. They generously taught me the skills I needed to accomplish such work.

The first report the AAPP published was about Myingyan prison. Myingyan prison was the worst prison in Burma, at the time, and we wanted to expose the situation there to the outside world. The report made the AAPP well known at the international level.

Following that, we nominated Ko Min Ko Naing for a student peace prize. A Norwegian, Camilla Buzzi, helped us apply for the prize, as did Ko Mon Aung. Ko Min Ko Naing was awarded the Student Peace Prize and I went on my first international trip in March 2001 to accept the prize on his behalf. The same year, Ko Min Ko Naing was awarded the Homo Homini Award from the Czech Republic and I was privileged to once again accept the prize on his behalf.

As the Joint-Secretary of the AAPP my main responsibilities are managing Western volunteers, writing proposals and reports, meeting with media (especially foreign media), funders, international delegations of governments and non-governmental organizations. I also act as a spokesperson for AAPP at international conferences and meetings.

A number of opportunities opened up for me to meet with international diplomats. Ko Thar Nyunt Oo and I had the chance to meet with the Prime Minister of Norway, while visiting the country and we talked to him about what was really happening inside Burma. Also, in the Czech Republic, we were able to hold a press conference with the then President, Vaclav Havel, a former political prisoner himself. While working at the AAPP, I have had the opportunity to meet with governmental officials, from Prime Ministers and presidents to foreign ministers and parliamentarians. In 2008, I met President of the United States, George W Bush.

The AAPP has developed an important relationship with the media. Burma is largely closed off to the media, so we play a vital role for journalists writing about the country. We have a way to communicate with the prisoners and

get their stories out. The AAPP members are always open to interviews with visiting journalists and we share our experiences in the hope that this may encourage them to share our stories with the rest of the world. I have my phone on 24/7 and we must never refuse any media inquiries, regardless of the time of day or night. During uprisings, demonstrations or political unrest inside Burma, we have many sleepless nights, for we have to answer phone calls and reply to e-mails from all over the world. When Ko Min Ko Naing and other prominent student leaders were arrested in August 2007, we worked day and night feeding information from inside Burma to eagerly awaiting international media. We are the lifeline between the outside world and those inside the prison and we must keep this lifeline open. We have a mutual understanding with the media that benefits both sides. We provide up-to-date, credible and exclusive information on political prisoners. The media use this information and it reaches political leaders around the world. Over time, the stories of these prisoners generate pressure on the international community to take a stand.

It was never my intention to seek international awards while working for the freedom of political prisoners. Nevertheless, I have received recognition at the international level for my work and the work of the AAPP. The first award was in 2002 from Amnesty International Italy after I was invited to join the Stop Torture Conference led by Amnesty in Italy.

Later, I was awarded the Human Rights Watch, *Human Rights Defender Award*, in 2008 and I visited the United States for the award ceremony. The following year, I was honored to receive, Human Rights Watch “Allison De Forge Award for Extraordinary Activism”. For this, ceremonies were held in England, Germany and Switzerland. These awards are not for me but for all the AAPP members, former political prisoners and, most of all, for my brothers and sisters standing tall in Burma’s prisons. Recognition of my work is not what is important to me but the increased awareness that these awards raise for the plight of my people in Burma. As long as I can, I will speak out against Burma’s repressive regime and advocate on behalf of those who cannot, my fellow country men and women who have dared to criticize the military government, who dared to dream.



OFFICE

Ko Tate Naing
Secretary

Ko Bo Kyi
Joint Secretary

U Tezaniya
EC member,
In-Charge of Finance

Ko Zaw Tun
EC member

Ko Aung Khaing Min
Office In-Charge

Current Staff

Ko Aung Lin

Ko Aung Myo Thein

Ko Htay Aung

Ma Khin Cho Myint

Ko Min Min

Ko San Min

Ko Soe Naing

Ko Thaw Tun Oo

Ko Thet Oo

Current Interns

1. Ko Tin Soe

Current Volunteers

1. Hannah Scott
2. Hannah Sansom
3. Jonas Stich
4. Laura Merriman

There are currently 126 AAPP members, living on the Thai-Burma border, and in other countries around the world.

Office Work

AAPP collects information on political prisoners and prison conditions in Burma. We also interview former political prisoners about their interrogation and prison experiences. These interviews are an important way of documenting the torture and harrowing conditions faced by political prisoners. AAPP also supports political prisoners and their families by providing them with financial assistance for necessities, such as food and medicine. We have been unable to support all political prisoners due to limitations in our capacity, financial restrictions and the inaccessibility of some prisoners. Even currently, we can only support about half of the more than 2000 political prisoners. Even then, this support is limited and does not fully meet the needs of the political prisoners. We wish we could reach all political prisoners and we are never satisfied with our limited capacity. However, we are aware that our supporters from the international community, fellow organizations both inside and outside of Burma, and our colleagues inside are satisfied with our activities.

Overview of the political prisoner situation

When AAPP was first founded in 2000, there were approximately 2,500 political prisoners. This figure dropped to 1,100 in 2005/2006 and then doubled again after September 2007. The number of political prisoners in Burma in September 2008 was over 2123. Among these political prisoners, about 700-900 were arrested during and in the aftermath of the peaceful protests led by the 88 Generation Students group in August and peaceful marches led by Buddhist Monks in September 2007. The figure has increased throughout 2009 and by March 2010, AAPP documented 2185 political prisoners in Burma.

The political prisoners included the following:

Monks	253
Elected Members of Parliament	12
Students	283
Women	177
NLD Members	430
Human Rights Defenders and Promoters	33
Ethnic	210
Nargis Relief Volunteers	20
Teachers	28
Journalists	42
Lawyers	12
Doctors	12

At least 137 political prisoners were in bad health and 275 political prisoners had been transferred to remote prisons far away from their families.

Volunteers



Over the past 10 years, more than 30 international volunteers have worked at AAPP. Some volunteers spend only a month or two at AAPP, others like Elliot and Rachel stayed for about two years. The OSI sponsored Burma Volunteer Program (BVP) has also helped by sending AAPP one volunteer every three months. International volunteers help AAPP with research, writing and editing media releases, reports, proposals and briefing papers. Furthermore, they also help AAPP members and office staff with language classes, office work, and capacity building. Our volunteers have come from all over the world and from all walks of life. They share their diverse life experience with us and we are richer for it. We have listed below the names of as many volunteers as we can remember. We sincerely apologize if we have missed anyone off the list.

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Mr. Daniel Ginsberg | 20. Ms. Donna Higgins |
| 2. Ms. Natasha Rothchild | 21. Ms. Sena Galazzi |
| 3. Ms. Elliot Bynum | 22. Ms. Daniella Lock |
| 4. Ms. Momoko Namura | 23. Ms. Rachel Fleming |
| 5. Mr. Christ Moon | 24. Ms. Jaime LaChance |
| 6. Mr. Udo Rehfeldt | 25. Ms. Hannah Scott |
| 7. Mr. Dan Welch | 26. Mr. Aaron P Morris |
| 8. Ms. Isla Glaister | 27. Ms. Sook De Jonge |
| 9. Ms. Alison aka Khin Khin | 28. Ms. Laurina Karsten |
| 10. Ms. Susan Russo | 29. Ms. Eva Jacobson |
| 11. Ms. Mary Purkey | 30. Ms. Hannah Sansom |
| 12. Ms. Elisa | 31. Ms. Amelie Janon |
| 13. Ms. Charlotte Chompff | 32. Ms. Emanuela Mackova |
| 14. Mr. Phil Thornton | 33. Ms. Chris Nancy Civret |
| 15. Mr. Tin Aye | 34. Ms. Megan Clymer |
| 16. Mr. Will George | 35. Ms. Laura Merriman |
| 17. Mr. Antoni Slodkowski | 36. Mr. Jonathan |
| 18. Mr. Vrouyr Makalian | 37. Ms. Win Leah Leah Nyein |
| 19. Mr. Ben Moose | |

Interns

During the first ten years, eight interns have been placed at AAPP. The length of their internships varies from three months to two years. Six interns were high school graduates from Yaung Ni Oo School, opened and run by ABSDF. After the internships, some interns have continued their education at colleges and universities; others have furthered their commitment to their mother organizations. AAPP provides interns with English language lessons, computer and office management skills, report writing, learning about democratization and some international relations experience.

Capacity Building Trainings

AAPP members and office staff have attended trainings and workshops, from basic to policy making level, and technical support trainings such as internet security or IT communications provided by fellow democracy organizations, donors and other international groups.





International Activities

Soon after AAPP was established, we received opportunities to cooperate with the international community. In order to communicate effectively at the international level, AAPP assigned representatives in the United States, Japan, Australia, Norway, Germany, England, and Belgium, in 2001. These representatives regularly communicate and cooperate with government officials, non-governmental organizations and community based organizations in their countries.

AAPP sends representatives to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva for its annual sessions to address human rights violations and the political prisoner situation in Burma. During these trips, AAPP representatives meet with officials from international organizations such

as International Committee for Red Cross, Amnesty International, as well as UN Special Rapporteurs.

AAPP received the opportunity in February 2003 to address the Senate and Congress of the United States. AAPP members highlighted the dire prison situation in Burma and urged them to actively support the release of all political prisoners.

In the past year, AAPP members have traveled to, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, Czech Republic, England, Italy and Canada. During these trips, members of AAPP met with world leaders, such as, the President and Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic, the Prime Minister and Secretary of State of Norway, the EU Commission and Parliament, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office of the United Kingdom. We encouraged the European Union to extend their resolution on Burma for another six months, a positive outcome of these meetings.

AAPP regularly engages with the international human rights mechanisms. The UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Special Rapporteur for Burma, many international organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and media groups rely on AAPP as their primary source of information about political prisoners, conditions of detention in Burma's prisons and the torture of democracy activists, journalists and members of the political opposition. AAPP's documentation and research centre collects this information and then it is reported internationally.

Information gathered by our documentation team is used for communications with the UN human rights mechanisms: the UN Special Procedures, the Treaty Bodies and most recently the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council. AAPP has a solid working relationship with these offices and they rely on AAPP for up to date information on Burma's political prisoner situation due to AAPP's credibility and proven efficiency in providing evidence and new and accurate information.



Reunion Dinner of Former Political Prisoners

In the past ten years AAPP has held reunion dinners for former political prisoners. The first reunion dinner was at the Burmese Reporters' Club at Thai-Burma border on September 2003, and over 40 former political prisoners attended.

The second reunion dinner was held at the AAPP office on AAPP's fifth anniversary on the 23rd of March 2005. The dinner was attended by 40 former political prisoners. The third dinner was held on the 10th Anniversary of AAPP at the AAPP office. Over 60 former political prisoners attended the dinner.

During the reunion dinners, former political prisoners share their political ideas, prison experiences and future plans and work strategies for the release of political prisoners and democracy and freedom in Burma.

Media

AAPP regularly provides information to both foreign and Burmese media and AAPP staff are always available for interviews. AAPP also participates in media discussions and debates. The media is an important vehicle for raising awareness about the crimes and violations committed by the military regime, to an international audience, as well as people in Burma.

Statements, Information Releases, Briefings and Reports

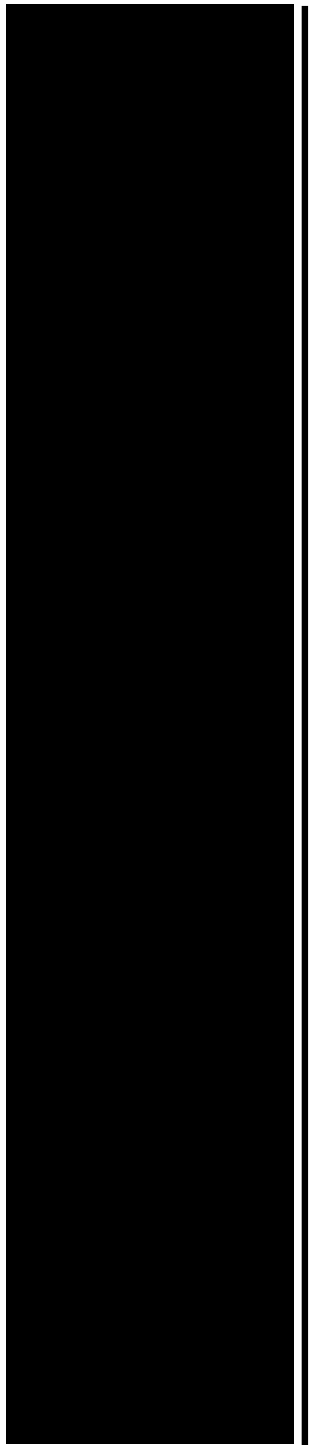
AAPP releases press statements, information releases, briefing papers and reports. Since its founding, 10 years ago, AAPP has released 207 statements and information releases regarding the political prisoner situation and human rights violations in Burma. AAPP has also released some joint statements with other human rights and pro-democracy organizations.



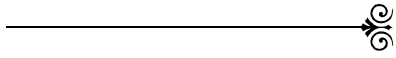
Website

AAPP launched its website in December 2001. The website provides information on the current political prisoner situation, as well as press statements and reports released by AAPP. Photos of current political prisoners are also available on the website, along with prisoner profiles, which detail biographical information about the prisoner as well as their arrest and sentencing history. Information from AAPP's database, including the current list of political prisoners, the list of those suffering from bad health is also available. The website also covers other issues such as background information on the history of Burma, an introduction about AAPP and AAPP campaigns. AAPP launched a Burmese version of the website on its fourth anniversary.

The website is found at this address
<http://www.aappb.org>.



PUBLICATIONS



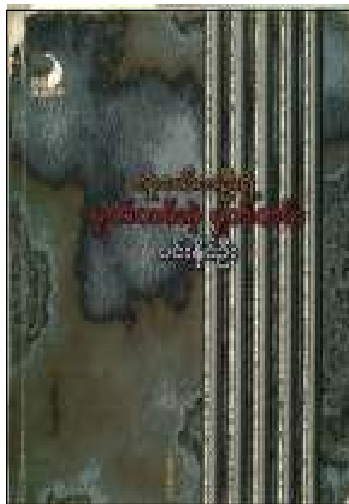
Publications

In the past decade, AAPP has published 32 reports and 15 books. The following is an example of some of these publications.



Spirit for Survival

Spirit for Survival was published in English in October 2001. The report includes articles on prison experience, poems, analysis, satire, opinion pieces written by former political prisoners. The book was also published in Korean, Japanese and German.



Memoirs without Record of a Youth

The book was written by author Win Naing Oo, a former political prisoner, and was published in October 2001. Saya U Tin Moe wrote the following introduction for the:

I thought about writing the preface for this book by wiping my tears with a poem. I can feel the experience in the book is more like a living hell, and for that I'd really like to thank the author Win Naing Oo for sharing this experience and for writing such a book.

Actually, I don't need to write the preface. I myself was once in Insein prison as a political

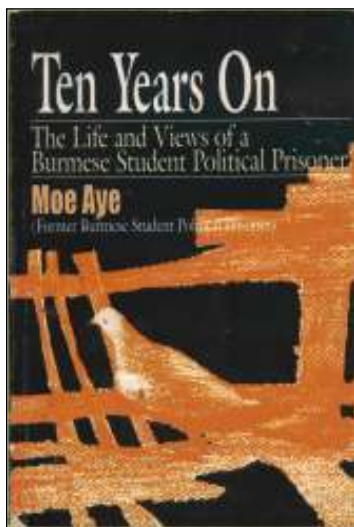
prisoner so I can vividly see and remember the experience in Insein prison. This book is both the heart and the window of democracy activists.

Brothers, I truly am so proud of your unwavering beliefs, and noble sacrifices. I believe that the tear streams from Win Naing Oo's book will turn into a spotlight beam for the people of Burma.

Sacrifices will never be forgotten.

Tin Moe

1/8/2001



Ten Years On

In July 2002, AAPP published the German version of Ten Years On, written by Moe Aye, a former political prisoner. In the book the author recalls his 10 year prison experience. It is the true story of life under military rule in Burma. This collection of articles sheds light on the horrific conditions political prisoners face. Though, it cannot express the entire mistreatment of the people. In other words, it's only a sentence in the book called "the military dictatorship."

Women Political Prisoners in Burma

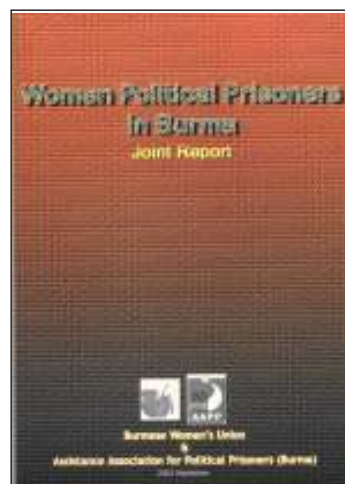
In February 2004, AAPP and Burmese Women's Union (BWU) published a joint report Women Political Prisoners in Burma. It was published in Burmese. The report explores what it is like for women political prisoners. It exposes the sexual harassment

women political activists in Burma have endured during interrogation, and in prison. Through interviews with former political prisoners the particular issues facing women are discussed including pregnant prisoners, motherhood, women's health care and sanitary needs in prison, as well as life after release.

In the current political movement, there are many female activists working together with male activists to struggle against the regime's repression. To restore democracy in Burma, many women have participated according to their own desire and knowledge.

We are releasing this report because it is our responsibility to record the experiences of the women who were imprisoned as a result of their participation in the movement. However, this report is not complete because of our limitations due to our location on the Thai-Burma border.

To talk about women's participation in politics is easy. It is far more difficult in practice. This report is intended to raise awareness about women in the democracy movement in order to advance the opportunities for women's participation in politics.



Burmese Women's Union
Assistance Association for Political Prisoners

(Burma from the forward of the report)
Women Political Prisoners in Burma (Eng)

In September 2004, the English version of the report “Women Political Prisoners in Burma” was jointly published with Women League of Burma (WLB). The report was updated with interviews from recently released women political prisoners.



The Noise of the Hanging Gallows

The Noise of the Hanging Gallows was published in March 2004 in Burmese. The articles in this booklet were written by political prisoners while in prison. The articles reached AAPP through different channels and AAPP

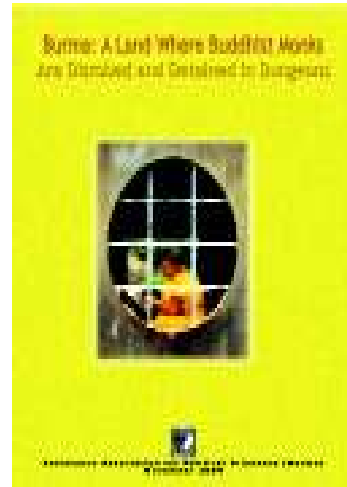
published the articles in a book to honor these political prisoners.

The strictest of the prison restrictions is forbidding obtaining any reading or writing materials such as pens or papers. Even pieces of newspapers or any readable pieces, such as wrapping paper for food, from family visits are usually seized by prison guards. Reading and writing were once allowed for educational purposes so prisoners could gain knowledge. However, under the successive military regimes, prisons became total tool of repression. Not only were political prisoners physically imprisoned, but also mentally iron shackled so that their brains turn to rust. Reading and writing in prison, is therefore, considered the most serious violation of the prison rules. Regarding this measure, Mr. Paulo Sergio Pinhero, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, once described the policy as “intellectual death.”

Excerpt from the Forward

Burma: A Land Where Buddhist Monks Are Disrobed and Detained in Dungeons

The report was published in November 2004 in English. The report introduces Buddhism in Burma and reveals the arrests and imprisonment of over 300 Buddhist monks under the military regime since 1988. It also documents the death of monks in forced labor camps. Articles and memoirs of former political prisoners who lived in prisons with imprisoned monks are also included in the report.



Handbook for Former Political Prisoners and their Families

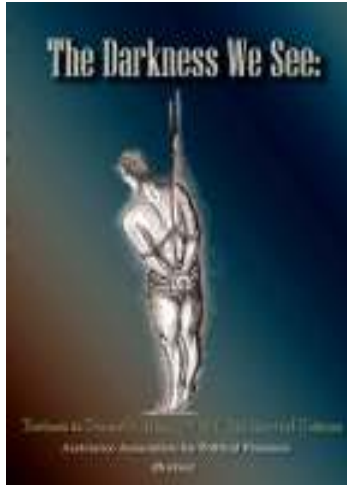
The handbook was published in August 2005 in Burmese. It is a translation of the chapter 'the manual for former political prisoners and families' from Counseling Torture Survivors. The handbook is for former political prisoners and their family members to help them cope with the brutal and systematic torture, which political prisoners subjected to in Burma.



The Darkness We See: Torture in Burma's Interrogation Centers and Prisons

The report was published in December 2005 in English. The report exposes the systematic torture methods in the military regime's interrogation centers and prisons, and the conditions of detention, including the denial medical care, which in itself may amount to torture. The report also explores the difficulties former political prisoners cope with after release from prison.

United States Senator, John McCain was quoted in the AAPP press release as saying:



"My heart goes out to those suffering for their belief in human rights and democracy. This report demonstrates that torture of political prisoners is a state policy of Burma's junta. All Americans, who stand by the Burmese people in their aspirations for freedom, should be outraged." McCain went on to say that the report "Illustrates in painstaking detail yet one more reason why United Nations Security Council action is long overdue. Those who care about human rights and human decency should press the Security Council to take up the issue of Burma immediately."

The report was translated into French with the help of France based Info Birmanie and Amnesty International (France).
Hugh Baxter (Burma Action Ireland), Eileen Seymour (Burma Action Ireland Chairperson), Mr. Conor Lenihan T.D., Minister of State for Development Cooperation and Human Rights and Ko Bo Kyi, Joint Secretary of Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).



Eight Seconds of Silence: The Death of Democracy Activists Behind Bars

The report was published in May 2006 in both English and Burmese. The report reveals that at least 127 political prisoners died in interrogation centers, in prisons and just after their releases due to the torture and maltreatment they experienced in Burma's places of detention.

Excerpt from the Forward

“By documenting the scourge of torture in Burma’s prisons, the AAPP shines a light on the government’s cruelty, and restores to its victims some of the dignity that their government tries to deny them. The report catalogues in meticulous detail the names, the stories, and the fate of political prisoners who were tortured, in many cases to death, simply because of their peaceful pursuit of human rights. It will help ensure that these good people are remembered and honored, and that the officials who persecuted them are one day held accountable for their crimes.”

Paulo Sergio Pinheiro

United Nations Special Rapporteur

on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar

The United Nations Thematic Mechanisms 2002

An overview of their work and mandates

The report was published in June 2008 and is a translation into Burmese of “The United Nations Thematic Mechanisms 2002 (An overview of their work and mandates). The purpose of the report is to protect the human rights of Burmese people. In order to prevent human rights violations, it is very important for people to know what rights they are entitled to, how to document violations, how and where to submit complaints, and so on. The report also includes a section explaining the transition from UN Human Rights Commission to UN Human Rights Council

The introduction of the UN Thematic Mechanisms, published by Amnesty Internatio



-nal and The Law Society of the United Kingdom, states the following:

*The purpose of this document is to provide assistance to those wishing to submit information to and follow studies of the thematic mechanisms. The primary focus of the paper is with the 17 mechanisms that **take action on individual cases** but it also contains basic information about all 24 of the current thematic mechanisms. Some mechanisms may appear to be covered in more detail than others but this is because of the nature of particular mandates or because less information exists for certain mechanisms. This document is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to serve as a guide to the scope of work of the thematic mechanisms and the types of information they seek, particularly from non-governmental sources. It is structured so that the thematic mechanisms that take action on individual cases are given in the first section, listed according to date of establishment. Those that do not take action on individual cases are given in the second section, and details of a new mandate are provided in section three.*

The Future in the Dark: the Massive Increase in Burma's Political Prisoners

The Future in the Dark was jointly published with the United States Campaign for Burma in September 2008. This report documents the arrests of 88 Generation Student Group members in August 2007 and the arrests of political activists in the 2007 Saffron Revolution. It exposes the unfair nature of the political prisoners' case trials and the treatment they were subjected to. The report was submitted to United Nations Security Council.

The Rearview Mirror Min Ko Naing

AAPP published the novelette “The Rearview Mirror” to honor imprisoned 88 Generation Student Leader, Ko Min Ko Naing, in October 2009. The book was authored by Ko Min Ko Naing and reflects on the reality of the time when the people of Burma were fed up with the system and joined with the student activists to try and change the system.

Excerpt from the publisher:

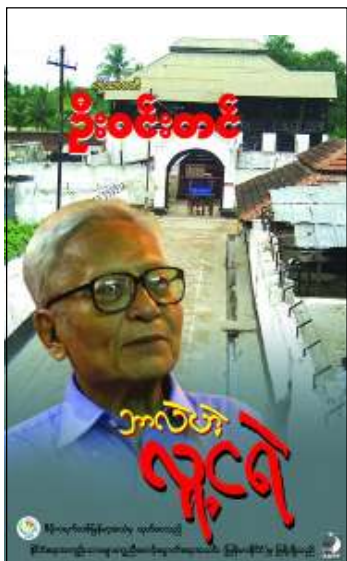


“He sacrificed his most productive times behind bars. Even though he sacrificed his life, he’s not a mere political animal. Even though he created words and thoughts, he is not a mere artist playing with dreams. His heart is pounding very purely and with love and compassion, his belief has become much brighter. He vividly reflects on the era he grew up in. We believe this composition will be remembered as a mosaic of the time.”

The Transition; Czech Experience

AAPP published the Burmese translation of the Czech Experience, in February 2008. In this book, the experiences of 24 political leaders, academics and experts who were involved in the democratic transition of the Czech Republic are reported.





**A Living Hell:
is that all you've got?!
U Win Tin**

The book was published to commemorate the 80th birthday of the Secretary of National League for Democracy, journalist and writer U Win Tin, on 12 March, 2010. The author U Win Tin recalls his memories from the 19 years he spent in prison. It tells the story of U Win Tin's unwavering commitment to freedom and democracy in Burma. Despite having spent more than 7,000 days in prison, he remains defiant against the regime. The book was published by Democratic Voice of Burma and distributed by AAPP.



Video Documentary

AAPP released a documentary film, *Burma Behind Bars*, in August 2003. The documentary tells the story of Burma's political prisoners, as well as the wider political situation in Burma. It also covers the emergence of AAPP. It is used to raise awareness about the human rights situation, and is most effective simply because it is former political prisoners sharing their true stories.

Burma Behind Bars



Music Album

At the beginning of 2006, AAPP released a revolutionary music album "Songs from the Cage." The songs on the album were composed by political prisoners while in prison, and are sung by former political prisoners for the album.



Songs from the Cage

Forward from the album

After the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, thousands and thousands of political activists were imprisoned. There have faced unimaginable repression and hardship. The harsher the repression, the stronger the loyalty of political prisoners to their people and the revolution. Due to that strong loyalty, the revolutionary songs flew from their hearts. They composed the songs in their minds, memorized them and then shared the songs with each other by word of mouth. This way, the songs spread from prison to prison and finally reached outside the prison walls. We, the Life University Music Production of AAPP, released these songs in an album to honor the political prisoners left behind.

Political prisoners always say:

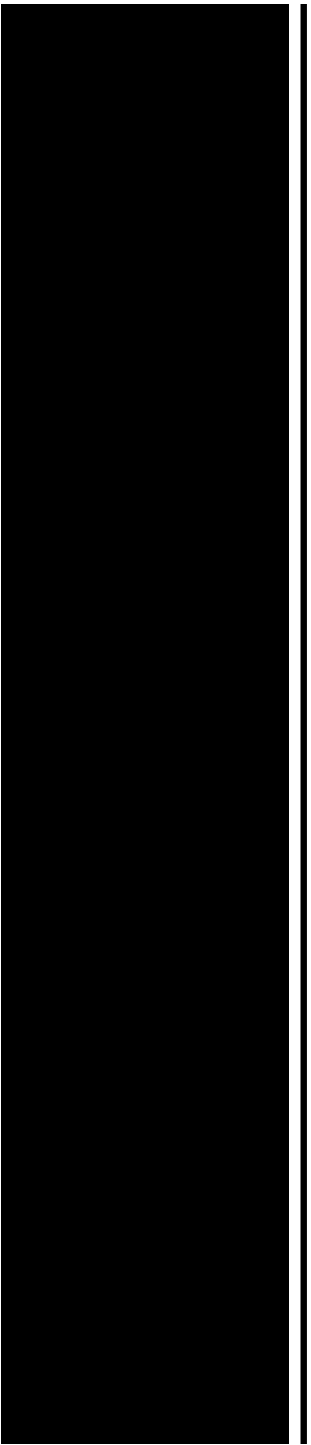
- Prison is the University of Life.
- Political prisoners are travelers on a long journey.
- Our fellow political prisoners, now released, are dawn birds ready to fly free.
- The 8888 uprising is the victory of the weaponless.
- Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the national leader.

For the sake of peace and stability in our country, we must find an end to the fighting and war.

We released this album for democracy activists from Burma, and all of those around the world, who support the movement for a free and democratic Burma.

**The Life University Music Production
Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)**





THERE CAN BE
NO NATIONAL RECONCILIATION
IN BURMA,
AS LONG AS THERE ARE
POLITICAL PRISONERS

CCAMPAIGNING

**FOR THE RELEASE OF
ALL POLITICAL PRISONERS**

Free Political Prisoners Campaign Committee

AAPP and eleven other organizations formed the Free Political Prisoners Campaign Committee (FPPCC) in 2001 November to 2002 to organize a campaign for the release of all political prisoners. The eleven other organizations are as follows:

1. All Arakan Students and Youth Congress (AASYC)
2. All Burma Federation of Student Unions _ Foreign Affairs Committee (ABFSU-FAC)
3. All Burma Student's Democratic Front (ABSDF)
4. All Burma Student League (ABSL)
5. All Burma Young Monk Union (ACYMU)
6. Democratic Party for New Society (DPNS)
7. Independent Pen Organization (IPO)
8. Karen National Union (KNU)
9. Network for Democracy and Development (NDD)
10. National League for Democracy- Liberated Area (NLD-LA)
11. Women League of Burma (WLB)

We provided a space for FPPCC's activities in our office. The FPPCC had photo exhibitions about the political situation and daily prison life in Burma and members speeches in 23 countries. Photo exhibitions were held in Thailand, Malaysia, India, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Sweden, Finland and Denmark.



Free Burma's Political Prisoners NOW!

AAPP and Forum for Democracy in Burma (FDB) initiated the Free Burma's Political Prisoners NOW! campaign in 2009. Over 230 democratic and ethnic organizations working for democracy and human rights in Burma and other international organizations and individuals actively participated in the campaign. On 13 March 2009, Burma's Human Rights Day, a global signature campaign started to Free Burma's Political Prisoners Now! It aimed to collect 888,888 signatures before 24 May 2009, the legal date that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi should be released from house arrest. The petition called on UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to make it his personal priority to secure the release of all political prisoners in Burma, as the essential first step towards democracy in the country. The target symbolized 8.8.88, the day the junta massacred some 3,000 people who courageously protested in Burma's largest democracy uprising. Over 100 pro-democracy groups in exile and Burma solidarity groups around the world worked together to take global action for political prisoners.

It was a truly global campaign and people from almost every country in the world took part. Photo exhibitions, panel discussions and speeches were held in many countries and signatures for the release of all political prisoners were collected. In the end a total of 677,250 signatures were collected and then submitted to the Secretary General of the United Nations. A closed-door meeting was held in New York with the UN Secretary General's delegation led by Mr. Ibrahim Gamberi. During the meeting, the campaign representatives discussed how the human rights violations in Burma are crimes against humanity and urged the UN to take effective action.



Nomination of International Awards

AAPP annually nominates political prisoners in Burma for international awards. We often work with international student organizations to campaign internationally to raise awareness about the sacrifice individual political prisoners have made for democracy and human rights. As a result of such campaigning, Ko Min Ko Naing was awarded the Student Peace Prize from the International Student Festival in Trondheim, Norway and the Homo Homini award from the Czech Republic. An AAPP member was invited to receive the prizes, which provided AAPP with the opportunity to speak with the international community regarding the treatment of political prisoners in Burma.

Other awards include:

Award from the Canadian Government to Min Ko Naing and Dr. Cynthia Maung in 1999

UNESCO awarded famous Burmese journalists and writers, U Win Tin and Daw San San Newh, the Golden Pen Freedom prize in 2001.

Civil Courage Prize from USA in 2005

Gwanju prize from South Korea in 2008

Honorary citizenship from Italy - 2001

Trinity College in the United States gave the first Human Rights award to three imprisoned school teachers, U Ye Tint, Ma khin Khin Laeh and Ma Thuza, in 2001

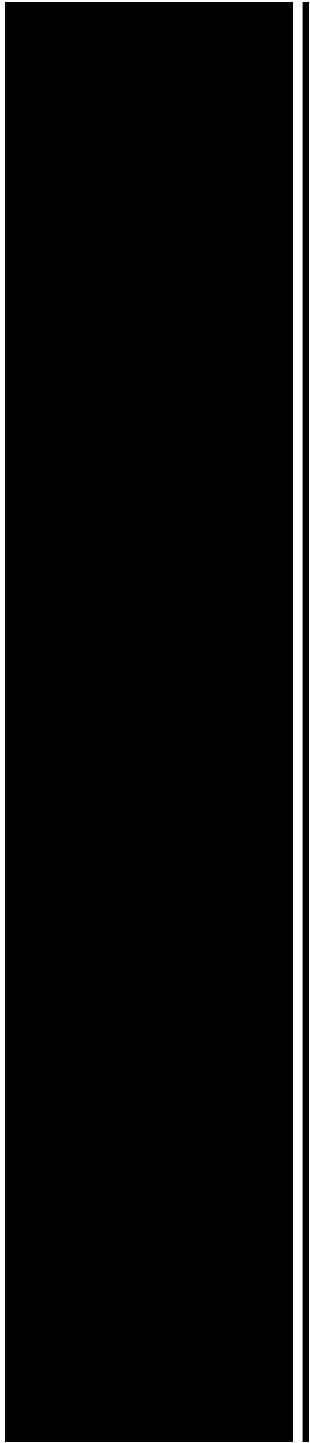
Human Rights Watch awarded poet Ko Aung Pwint, who was arrested in 2000, the Hellman/Hammett award in 2004



Human Rights Defender Awards from Human Rights Watch

The 2008 International Human Rights Defender Award from Human Rights Watch was awarded to Ko Bo Kyi, the Joint Secretary of AAPP.

The 2009 Alison des Forges Award for Extraordinary Activism from Human Rights Watch was also awarded to Ko Bo Kyi. Ko Bo Kyi attended award ceremonies in England, Germany and Switzerland. Human Rights Watch in a statement announcing the award said, "Over the last 20 years, Bo Kyi has demonstrated unfaltering courage, sharing his story and those of other political prisoners and exposing the Burmese military government's abuses. Human Rights Watch honors Bo Kyi for his heroic efforts to speak out against Burmese repression and to advocate on behalf of those who have dared to criticize the military government."



**THE
EXHIBITION
ROOM**





The Exhibition Room



In 2001, AAPP set up an exhibition room for the purpose of educating visitors about the situation of prisoners in Burma, the prison conditions and the related human rights violations. The exhibition room contains a collection of portraits of political prisoners, including portraits of prisoners who have died in detention. Furthermore, several pictures from and of prisons and forced labor camps show the daily life of the detainees. The exhibition also includes documentation of prison conditions and means of



interrogation and torture used by the authorities. Last but not least, the room contains a collection of international awards granted to political prisoners and proof of international support for their situation and cause. Since its establishment the exhibition room has hosted thousand of visitors yearly, including delegations from various governments, members of human rights organizations, international academics and students, UN representatives and many other people who take an interest in the political situation in Burma.

a testament of our lives; devotion from our hearts

When you enter a zinc plated gate of a compound somewhere in the border town of Mae Sot, you will see a two story wooden house at the end of a yellow earthen track with shady mango trees along the way. Next to the house, there's a building more like a garage or storage shed, with a small entrance with iron bars. Beyond the entrance you will find a dim room known as the political prisoner exhibition room. Before entering the room for the first time, do not forget to take a deep breath.

Now, open the door.

As soon as you enter the exhibition room, you might feel you are falling into a deep trench or drowning. But do not worry. This is not a trap. This is a forgotten, dark corner of an otherwise bright and beautiful world. The exhibition room represents the reality of the daily lives of people in Burma, not their fictional or imaginary representations. The exhibition room is displayed with the electric-shocked hearts, the blind-folded hopes and the jackboot crushed dreams of our iron-shackled existence. The exhibition room was created to invite visitors to



experience the stories of people trapped inside the dark side of the world.

You will see the map of Burma on your left with rivers flowing steadily, mountain ranges paralleling each other, vast plains, delta areas and thick forests. Imagine natural resources: oil, gem stones, teak forests and numerous minerals; natural resources once used to build the dreams and futures of the peoples of Burma.

Now, those natural resources became reinforcements for the military regime; turned into tanks, fighter planes, nuclear reactors and secret bank accounts.

For people in Burma, prison walls emerged in the whole country. That's what the people of Burma have.

There are 42 prisons in Burma. Details of the prisons: locations, names, distances and weather are displayed on the map. There are political prisoners in almost every prison. Political prisoners are imprisoned even though they have not committed any crimes. They are imprisoned simply because they exercise their basic civil and political rights; because they stand for what they believe in. We can say that even a single political prisoner left inside prison is the imprisonment of truth. Those who imprison the truth will never represent the truth.

You can also see photos and blue prints of prisons, and the model of the notorious Insein Central prison sits in the middle of the room. There are models of the cellblocks and cells which house political prisoners like animals, resembling, more closely, cages for tigers and lions in a zoo.

On one side of the wall, there are photos of the *pounsans* positions prisoners must adopt. They serve as reminders of the degrading and inhumane relationship between prisoners and authorities, created to systematically crush prisoners' dignity. In all the positions, prisoners are not allowed to make any eye contact with prison authorities. Such is the relationship between



master and slave. These punishment positions are designed to hurt those who will not accept servitude: the relationship between master and slave, with its insulting treatments and degrading rules, they know those positions will be for all the people if the militarism rooted in Burma prevails.

On the other side, are photos documenting forced labor camps where prisoners are assigned to hard labor without proper food and medical care. These camps are killing fields and are worse than the POW camps and forced labor camps under Japanese Imperial rule in Burma. Japanese imperial forces were not as smart as the military regime, so they didn't designate their forced laborers or POWs as volunteers which the military regime has done. In Burma, the military regime's definition of forced labor and volunteer is not so different.

In one picture, you will see prisoners drawing water from a well, a depiction of Thayet prison, one of the notorious prisons where political prisoners are tortured. In Thayet prison, political prisoners were assigned to carry water, from a well about 40 feet deep, for vegetation in the prison compound and for the whole prison population. Eight political prisoners as a group were assigned to carry water from the well to fill hundreds of barrels. Prison authorities claimed that they did this for the health of political prisoners, so they could exercise: prison healthcare from a kind hearted regime.

Today we are living in a knowledge-age and even the military regime, which refuses almost everything, tries to keep up with it. People in this knowledge-age are encouraged to learn. But knowledge is power. Over seven decades ago, under colonial rule, political prisoners were allowed to learn, read and write in prisons. Now, under the rule of our own blood, political prisoners' learning is degraded to the level of reading from the filters of cheroots. Even a sheet of newspaper wrapping food is seriously seized upon at the prison gate, as if it was a



time bomb. Under this suppressive and restrictive situation, political prisoners never give up on learning and communicating with each other in prison. Political prisoners write with sharpened sticks on plastic sheets and read the writing under lights. You will also see that in some photos.

A famous writer named prison: the University of Life. Political prisoners learn a lot from prison life. The more severe the oppressors and the more restrictions we political prisoners face in the effort to turn our brains to rust, the harder we learn and the more creative we become.

The colorful bags, handy crafts, plastic beads, chess pieces made from soap and other items you find displayed in the museum were made by political prisoners who defied the authorities' restrictions on learning. By using patience and concentration, political prisoners learn from one another, they learn from prison life.

Political prisoners' knowledge, beliefs and fighting spirits have never been crushed by the military regime because of this learning. Furthermore, because of that learning spirit, former political prisoners are bonded together on the path to fight against the military regime.



Fighting for and standing for the truth is the highest quality of humanity and the recognition of and encouragement for those who fight for the truth is very meaningful. The warm relationship between those freedom and truth fighters and the supportive international community, and the dedication to triumph over the oppressive dictatorship, can be seen from the prizes and awards displayed on a table. Those awards are not gold medals bringing fame and money, nor appetizers for the reputation of political prisoners, but actually they are the recognition from the whole

world of the bravery and unwavering spirit of those fighting against unjust rulers in an unjust world.

Every former political prisoner has a life story from their prison life. The AAPP has released those remarkable memoirs to the international community and will continue to do so in the future, for as long as there are political prisoners there will be stories; until the end of the military rule. From the piles of reports and books displayed, pick one up and read from it. Take 'Spirit for Survival.' In reading from it, you can imagine how a pair of iron-shackled legs keeps walking, and how a tortured heart keeps beating, and how the people of Burma survive the oppression. We always share something from our hearts with your heart.

Before leaving the exhibition room, you will see hundreds of faces on the wall which are saying good bye to you. The faces from the photos are the faces of political prisoners still languishing in prisons in Burma; our brothers and sisters who never give up their hopes and beliefs to work for the people. Some political prisoners have prison sentences longer than their ages. Yes, they greet you and farewell you.

Now it is time to say goodbye but whenever you go, and wherever you go, please take our exhibition room with you. Thank you.

Nhin Khar Moe

*The Article was published in New Era Journal
Nhin Khar Moe is a former political prisoner lived in Insein
and Thayet prisons, a member and a former EC member
of AAPP.*



Conclusion

A decade has passed since AAPP was founded on 23 March 2000. This report is a record of that decade: the experiences, the struggles, the ups and downs. We, the members of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma), are grateful to the organizations and individuals who have supported and worked with us in the struggle for human rights in Burma. We would also like to pledge to continue our work until all political prisoners are free. The release of all political prisoners is a fundamental tenet for peace, national reconciliation, and the realization of equality for all ethnic nationalities in Burma. The individuals imprisoned were working for the betterment of the nation, for a brighter future for their people, but the path they choose to walk was different to that of the military regime. Due to this difference, the military regime defined them as enemies of the state and they were treated accordingly. In reality, these prisoners had a vital role to play in improving the country, and still do if given the chance. They have the skills and the ability to organize and lead the people; they also have their trust and love.

Therefore, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners strongly believes that protecting and promoting the rights of political prisoners, and working for their release, is the struggle for the realization of basic human rights for all people. We hope that AAPP has contributed in some way to the pursuit of democracy and human rights in Burma.

Even though we have accomplished a lot during the decade, there were many difficulties and challenges. When faced with challenges, we hold tight to the belief that without the release of all political prisoners in Burma our people will never be free. With this knowledge in our hearts, step by step, we overcame the difficulties. We are satisfied with our progress, though our achievements will never make up for the suffering our people still endure and will never bring back our brothers and sisters who lost their lives in the fight for a free and democratic Burma.

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)

