



Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)

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Emergency Release : COVID-19 in Burma's Prisons

16 July 2020

Across Burma COVID-19 is devastating communities, in this way the junta is benefiting from the spread of the deadly disease, they don't have to use weapons, the virus is killing people. Thousands are dying from lack of oxygen whilst the junta claims people are hoarding supplies, in fact the junta has ordered oxygen factories to refuse refilling cylinder from individuals. Charity groups are struggling to save the lives of COVID-19 patients, but the junta shoots at crowds of people trying to fill up containers of oxygen for their loved ones.

In prisons the situation is getting worse, the junta has restricted visits to lawyers and family, even prison staff cannot make contact with outside. It is becoming even more difficult to obtain information. However, AAPP knows there have been outbreaks in Insein, Hpa-an Taung Galay, Taunggyi and Taungoo prisons, but we do not know how many have been affected, or even how many have been killed. NLD legal advisor U Nyan Win has contracted COVID-19, but he is in a prominent position and receiving medical treatment at Yangon General Hospital. The situation for the other individuals still detained will be much worse. AAPP's 2018 report on Prison Overcrowding and the Urgent Need for Reform analysed an investigation conducted by the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission in 2017 revealed

rampant overcrowding. Of the 30 prisons investigated by MNHRC, there was a total capacity of 31,500 but the prisons were found to hold over 50,000 prisoners, 19,000 over capacity. The problem has not improved since the report's publication.

From AAPP's previous visits to prisons we understand that medical care is not nearly sufficient, Burma's prisons are in control of an institution which does not care if people die. The success of the civilian government to procure vaccines and administer them has been dismantled by the military coup.

At the outbreak of COVID-19 last year, AAPP visited 33 prisons and labour camps from May to November 2020 to distribute masks, and sanitiser, probing officials on statistics and practices from the arcane military-controlled prison department. We did this because the military-controlled prison department could not be trusted to reveal the truth. Just as the junta is now torturing people to death and saying COVID-19 is the cause.

It is clear COVID-19 is being used as a weapon of war by the junta, the terrorists in the so-called State Administrative Council understood an outbreak would happen. They occupied hospitals to launch night-time

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raids to detain medical students, tortured healthcare workers, and indiscriminately shot at protests led by doctors and nurses.

Prisoners in Burma remain especially at risk to the spread of disease because of chronic overcrowding and systemic violations to their rights. Prison staff are also poorly trained, and in Insein and Taunggyi where there are rumours of infection, ratio of prisoners to one staff was 14.6, and 16.0 respectively.

Not nearly enough for officials to monitor the physical and mental health of prisoners, or isolate prisoners displaying symptoms or with positive infection.

This is why thousands of pro-democracy supporters are at risk, especially in Yangon. Legal advisor U Khin Maung Myint told The Irrawaddy on 7 July that there are around 13,000 prisoners inside Insein Prison which has a capacity of 5000. This would mean according to U Khin Maung Myint, that Insein is now operating 260% over-capacity.

Reports of an outbreak in Taunggyi Prison are also a significant threat, the prison was operating at 251.3% overcapacity even before the coup, 754 prisoners to its 300 intended capacity. But there are systematic issues beyond overcrowding, HIV is highly prevalent in prisons, and the junta's letter to MSF to stop work in in Dawei treating HIV patients is indicative of their approach to the human life.

According to a reliable source, there has been a recent outbreak of COVID-19 in Taung Galay Prison, Hpa-An. A woman died on suspicion of COVID-19 last week in a custody cell, but the news was not disclosed by the prison. Prisoner patients who lost the sense of smell are being

kept together with other inmates and denied necessary medical treatment, their access to medical supplies is also being restricted due to the prohibition of family visits and communication.

It is clear what the junta thinks of fundamental rights, the vaccination program must not be administered by the junta. The people do not want this, and they will not trust the process. AAPP has great concern for everyone in Burma and its ramifications for the entire region.

“ In order to help our people, we need a trusted leadership, chosen by the people with free civil and political civic space inside the country. We therefore urge the international community including the US, EU, ASEAN, China, UN and donor organizations to put pressure on the junta to restore civilian government and open civil political and civic space.”