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Statement on the Reproductive Health of Political Prisoners

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According to the data gathered and documented by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), there are a total of (22,783) political prisoners in prisons run by the junta in Burma, and (4,308) of them are female political prisoners. During imprisonment, women have distinct and essential hygiene and healthcare needs that must be adequately met to protect their health, dignity, and basic human rights. Rule 5 of the United Nations Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders (Bangkok Rules) clearly sets out this requirement. Access to menstrual pads, sufficient healthcare and proper support to maintain a regular menstrual cycle is essential.

Observations made by the AAPP show that women in prisons are experiencing widespread irregular menstruation, with many not receiving a period for around three months and in some cases, up to six months.

The alarming pattern is rooted in two key factors: the harsh conditions and the systematic torture and abuse inflicted on prisoners. A lack of nutritious food is commonplace in prisons and causes deficiencies in essential nutrients, including iron, which are critical for healthy menstruation. This is sometimes compounded with excessive physical labor. Insufficient access to clean water, difficulty obtaining menstrual pads, and poor waste disposal systems further increase the risk of infections and hormonal imbalances. Together, these conditions disrupt the body's normal functions and can prevent women from menstruating.

At the same time, psychological abuse, constant threats, prolonged fear and the trauma caused by physical torture during interrogation and imprisonment can damage the hypothalamus in the brain, which regulates hormones and can result in menstruation to stop altogether.

Prison authorities often ignore prisoners' health rights, and prison clinics have little to no specialist female doctors. Commonly, female prisoners are only given painkillers like diclofenac and paracetamol. Prison staff have been shown to dismiss their pain, stating that they are 'pretending' or that the pain is only 'minor', and refuse to transfer individuals to hospitals outside the prison. In short, authorities often fail to prioritize spending on basic healthcare for female prisoners.

In some cases, women require medical examinations after release and have to undergo surgery for gynecological conditions that developed or worsened in prison. Serious health issues can have long-term consequences when left without adequate medicine, proper diagnosis or

specialist care. Therefore, some released political prisoners are facing kidney problems after release, as well as chronic pain and skin diseases.

A political prisoner, who suffered from reproductive health issues, stated:

“There is no special care provided for women’s monthly periods, and they just give the same medicine for everything. I went to the clinic because I had cramps during menstruation, and they gave me the same painkillers [that they give everyone]. I went there because I was in pain, hoping they would give me proper medicine, but they only provided painkillers. Going to the [prison] hospital didn’t make any difference. One of the female inmates who was with me hadn’t had her period for three or four months, and we didn’t know why. [We thought] it was caused by stress and pressure in prison. Even so, the prison authorities did not allow us to be examined by a female doctor. They only gave us menstrual pads once a month. I submitted requests for medical treatment and also raised these issues when the Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent visited once a week, including asking to allow us to bring certain medicine into the prison. We basically had to fight for our rights. I requested all the rights I was entitled to. However, the prison authorities, as usual, claimed that we were not allowed to get the medicine that I had requested or I could receive an amount that was not sufficient for my needs. They asked whether the medicine at the hospital was not enough.”

A former female political prisoner, who previously worked in the health sector before joining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), provided a testimony to explain the health situation of prisoners.

“In various prisons across Burma, I have witnessed female prisoners suffering from many serious health problems due to the mental and physical abuse that they have experienced. One of the most common and concerning conditions is amenorrhea [the absence of menstruation].”

Menstruation may stop or become irregular due to hormonal imbalances. Such an imbalance does not just cause short term inconveniences but can also have serious long-term consequences for health. The decrease in the production of the hormone, estrogen, causes bones to weaken and break easily and increases the risk of osteoporosis. Hormonal imbalances can also affect heart health, while abnormal physical changes make individuals more vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The ongoing human rights violations against female political prisoners, including their arbitrary detention, torture and inadequate living conditions, has long-term reproductive health issues that threaten the well-being of an entire generation. Domestic and international human rights organizations need to pay special attention to this lack of healthcare.

The junta, including prison authorities, bears the primary responsibility to address the health problems currently faced by female prisoners. The AAPP urges domestic and international organizations to strongly pressure the junta to resolve the issues outlined above and to provide adequate healthcare for both male and female political prisoners in prison.

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