



# Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma)

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## Burma's women political prisoners

Burma has many women activists who sacrificed their freedom for their political beliefs. These brave women often sacrifice so much more than their freedom, as prison conditions can have lasting impact on their health. Tin Tin Htwe a.k.a. Ma Pae was the most recent political prisoner to die in prison, when she died from a burst aneurysm on 23 December 2009<sup>1</sup>. In addition Kay Thi Aung suffered a miscarriage late in her pregnancy during her incarceration<sup>2</sup>.

According to AAPP records there are 177 women currently imprisoned across Burma. These women come from all sectors of civil society. There are healthcare workers, student activists, NLD members and nuns. The military regime has also targeted women, whose husbands and fathers are active pro-democracy leaders. Some women have spent over 10 years in deplorable conditions. There are at least 10 women who have had serious health concerns.

On International Women's Day, AAPP wishes to highlight the following women, and calls for their immediate release.

### Prison conditions for women political prisoners

Following their arrest women political prisoners are interrogated. At this point they are at risk of torture, abuse and even rape. AAPP has documented stories of many women who were tortured in interrogation centres<sup>3</sup>. One former woman political prisoner who was released in September 2009, Ma Ma Cherry<sup>4</sup> has told of a female political prisoner at her prison, who was tortured during interrogation and continued to feel pain from her injuries for a long time afterwards.

Ma Ma Cherry experienced many health problems during her 11 years in prison. She suffered a heart attack, but was not allowed to leave the prison to go to hospital. An ECG machine was brought into the prison, which was all the investigation she had. She also suffered from nerve damage to her arm, which caused her arm to be dead for

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<sup>1</sup> AAPP *Female political prisoner Tin Tin Htwe@ Ma Pae dies in Prison*, 24 December 2009.

<sup>2</sup> AAPP, *AAPP Strongly condemns inadequate healthcare for political prisoners in Burma's prisons*, 23 January 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See 'Women Political Prisoners in Burma' Joint report by Women's League of Burma and Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Her name has been changed.

2 years. She had a bout of vomiting blood where she was then examined for TB. It turned out that it wasn't TB, yet no further tests were carried out. In addition Ma Ma Cherry suffered from severe diarrhoea on a few occasions. She said that this was one of the worst experiences in prison. As the toilet facilities were extremely basic.

Ma Ma Cherry rarely saw a doctor when she was unwell. Many times when she requested one, he never came. Ma Ma Cherry is left with pain in her lower body and it is now difficult to sit down for long periods. On top of her physical ailments she experienced acute depression during a 2 year period, and at one time was unable to walk for 2 days.

Another female prisoner at Moulmein prison endured 4 years of vaginal bleeding. A visiting Burmese professor attempted to help by donating bottles of blood. This prisoner eventually was sent to the hospital for surgery, however the bleeding started again shortly after. When Ma Ma Cherry was released, this prisoner was still suffering from this condition.

Women political prisoners are imprisoned in separate sections to male prisoners and should be kept separate from criminal prisoners. However in Moulmein prison, where Ma Ma Cherry was kept for the majority of her sentence, there were two women political prisoners who were put with criminal prisoners. They were then subject to more abuse and harassment by prison guards and the other prisoners. She said that when a political prisoner makes a complaint, the prison authorities usually respond to their request. However, prisoners in the criminal section don't have any possibility to make any complaints. Criminal prisoners are more likely subject to abuse and mistreatment from the prison guards. For example in Moulmein prison the head prison guard would kick women in the face with her boots or pull their hair. In addition the criminal prisoners themselves abuse and threaten the political prisoners. Ma Ma Cherry puts this down to jealousy of political prisoner's education and moral behaviour.

Facilities in Burma's prisons for washing and cleaning are particularly bad and lack of privacy can be a problem. In Tharrawaddy prison the women's cell block was separated from the men's cell block by an empty space and the women's bathroom was adjacent to the empty area. Some prison guards took the opportunity to make a small hole in which they could watch the women bathing. At first the women were oblivious to the fact they were being watched while they showered. The women found out after a male political prisoner heard something suspicious and suspected the prison officials. The women had to stand on each other's shoulders to catch the prison guards spying<sup>5</sup>. It was reported to prison authorities who then punished the prison guards.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on AAPP interviews with former political prisoners.

## Women Political Prisoners

### **Naw Bey Bey** (age 24 – Karen)



Naw Bey Bey is from Karen State, where she trained in community primary healthcare, after which she began to work in healthcare for Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs). She was arrested in January 2006, by Tatmadaw troops in Toungoo District, Karen state. Naw Bey Bey had been home to visit her family after she received word that her mother had died.

After Naw Bey Bey's arrest it was reported that she was interrogated and beaten. She was seen in a Tatmadaw camp near the village of Play Sa Lo, looking bruised, unfed, frail and wearing torn clothing. There have been several reports of Naw Bey Bey being taken out of prison and forced to travel with the Burmese Army as a medic. During this time it was reported that she was raped by soldiers.

### **Daw Khaw Tiza (age 59), Wai Wai Nu (age 24) and Khin Khin Nu (age 29),** (mother and 2 daughters -Rohingya)

Daw Khaw Tiza is married to U Kyaw Min. U Kyaw Min is an elected Member of Parliament for Buthidaung Township, Arakan State, member of Committee Representing the People's Parliament (CRPP) and central executive committee member of the National Democratic Party for Human Rights (NDPHR). Daw Khaw Tiza has been imprisoned mainly for her husband's political involvement. They are all ethnic Rohingyas. Rohingyas are a predominantly Muslim group which have been victims of violent and humiliating discrimination in Burma for decades.

Following U Kyaw Min's arrest in March 2005, Daw Khaw Tiza and her two daughters were arrested on 5 May 2005. All family members were taken to Insein prison but not allowed to see each other. U Kyaw Min was given a 47 year sentence and his wife and daughters each received 17 years and 50,000 kyat fine. In October 2005 it was reported by a family friend that Daw Khaw Tiza was suffering from serious pain.

### **Nan Nyunt Ye Hlaing**

Nan Nyunt Ye Hlaing is from Kayan District in central Burma. She was arrested in August 1996 and sentenced to 15 years in prison. She is believed to be in Loikaw prison. The Kayan people have been scattered among four states in Burma. They desire an administrative area where they can preserve and develop Kayan traditions and culture.

### **Than Than Htay (age 43)**



Than Than Htay has so far spent almost 10 years in detention. She was arrested in June 2000 when she worked with other students in demanding that the military regime re-open universities and colleges following the 1999 student demonstrations. She had previously spent 1 year in prison for her involvement with ABSFU. She has been given a 17 year sentence for her connections with exiled groups, in particular the ABFSU foreign affairs committee.

On 15 December 2009 Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) received information that Daw Than Than Htay has been suffering from neurosis and chronic severe headaches since March 2006. She was allowed several doctor visits in 2006 and 2008; however, she has been denied access to further medical treatment since September 2008 even though she continues to have severe headaches. She is known to be afflicted with rheumatoid arthritis.

### **Phyo Phyo Aung (age 20)**



Phyo Phyo Aung and her father, Dr. Nay Win, who were both volunteers with *The Group That Buries the Dead*, had assisted burying and cremating around 200 corpses after cyclone Nargis hit in May 2008. They were both sentenced to four years imprisonment. Phyo Phyo Aung is a student and member of ABFSU. Phyo Phyo Aung had been a student activist during the Saffron Revolution, and had gone into hiding. Following the cyclone, she and other student activists came out of hiding to help gather dead bodies.<sup>6</sup>

### **Honey Oo (age 21)**



Law student and member of All Burma Federation Student Union (ABFSU), Honey Oo was arrested in October 2007. She was one of 20 leaders chosen when the ABFSU was reformed on 28 August 2007 in the lead up to the Saffron Revolution. After her arrest, Honey Oo's family wrote to the director of prison administration requesting that she be allowed to sit her final exams in detention. At this point in time, she had not been convicted of any offence. Authorities denied permission for Honey and 2 other students to sit their exams. Thus, Honey has been unable to finish her law degree.

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<sup>6</sup> AAPP, Cyclone Nargis Anniversary Report, May 2009.

In November 2008, Hooney was transferred to Lashio prison in Northern Shan state, which is over 600 miles from her family in Rangoon.

### **Mar Mar Oo (age 45)**



Mar Mar Oo was just a high school student when she was first sentenced to 3 years in prison with hard labour. She was the first woman activist accused under Section 5/j of the Emergency Provision Act. Following her release, Mar Mar Oo was undeterred in her political activities, as she joined the 1996 student's movement. She was again arrested and sentenced to 14 years with hard labour.

Mar Mar Oo received a prison sentence of 70 years in 2008, which was 5 years more than the other defendants at her trial. Under section 401, a former political prisoner must finish the remainder of their sentence if they break the agreement not to participate in politics. Mar Mar Oo had previously been imprisoned in 1989 and in 1996. When she was released, she still had 5 years left to serve and this was then added to her 65 year sentence for her involvement in the Saffron revolution. She is now in Tharawaddy prison in Southern Burma.

### **Daw Win Mya Mya (age 60)**



Daw Win Mya Mya has been a member of National League for Democracy and an activist since 1988. She was travelling with Daw Aung Suu Kyi's motorcade in Depayin in 2003, when it was attacked by a militia mob. During that attack, Daw Win Mya Mya broke both arms. She still suffers from nerve damage as a result of those injuries.

Daw Win Mya Mya also suffers from low blood pressure, diabetes and has difficulty sitting or standing. She is currently in Putao prison, the coldest prison in the far north of Burma.

In February 2010 local authorities auctioned off her shop, thereby cutting off a possible livelihood in the future.

### **Khin Khin Win (age 67)**

Khin Khin Win was arrested on 14 May 2009 and sentenced to 1 year and 6 months under house arrest. She is a member of NLD and lives with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

**Daw Theingi @ Than Yi (age 65), Daw Seittavati@ San San Htay (age 33), Daw Wunna @ Khin Hla (age 68) , Daw Pyinya Theingi @ Nyunt Nyunt @ Khin Nyunt Wai (age 55), Daw Thila Nadi @ Aye Aye (age 49)**

Are all nuns from Thitsa Tharaphu monastery who were sentenced to 4 years and 3 months in prison and are currently in Insein prison. They were arrested in October 2007 after Burmese security forces raided monasteries and religious schools following the Saffron revolution. All the nuns were charged with “injuring or defiling a place of worship (Section 295 of the Penal Code), insulting... either [through] spoken or written [means]... another religion” (section 295(a)) unlawful assembly, and possession of explosives, allegedly hidden in monasteries<sup>7</sup>. It was reported in January 2009,<sup>8</sup> that some of the monks and nuns arrested from Thitsa Tharaphu monastery were suffering from malnutrition. They have allegedly been denied family visits and thus were not able to receive sufficient food.

### **Women with urgent health concerns**

#### **Thet thet Aung**



She was given a total 65 year sentence in November 2008 for her activities during the Saffron Revolution. She is a member of 88 Generation Students Group, who through their protests in August 2007 sparked off the Saffron Revolution. In October 2009, AAPP learnt that she urgently requires heart surgery even though she is only 32 years old. Thet Thet Aung has a history of heart disease and has recently been suffering from blackouts and hypertension<sup>9</sup>.

Thet Thet Aung is said to take real joy in being a mother to her three sons aged 9, 7 and 2. Her husband was given a sentence of 11 years. Their children are currently staying with Thet Thet Aung’s mother. Her friends remember that she is always smiling and laughing, and she likes to tell funny stories.

#### **San San Tin**



**San San Tin** is Thet Thet Aung’s aunt and mother of US-Burmese political prisoner Nyi Nyi Aung. In October 2007 San San Tin was arrested and shortly after she is began serving a 9 year sentence for ‘aiding and abetting a wanted person’. She had assisted her son Nyi Nyi Aung and other pro-democracy activists. San San Tin is in poor health, in January 2008 her sister said that she has a tumour on her neck and is due for an operation.<sup>10</sup> She previously had an operation on her left eye, which has now deteriorated further. San San Tin was hospitalised in November 2008

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<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Burma’s Forgotten Prisoners*, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> DVB 30 January 2009.

<sup>9</sup>Radio Free Asia, 18 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> DVB 28 January 2008



for investigations. It was reported in June 2009 that San San Tin was suffering from heart disease and swelling in her neck<sup>11</sup>.

## **Ni Mo Hlaing**



**Ni Mo Hlaing** is a member of the National League for Democracy (NLD) the main opposition political party in Burma. She was given a 5 year sentence in March 2009 for her involvement in the Saffron Revolution of 2007 and efforts to after cyclone Nargis. During the Saffron Revolution she was badly beaten by security forces. *“I don’t even remember how many times I was beaten. The only thing I heard was ‘Hit that bitch! Hit that bitch!’ from the plainclothes security officials. My clothes were torn, my watch broken, my umbrella and sandals were lost there.”*<sup>12</sup>

In October 2009, the prison authorities contacted her family to inform them that Ni Mo Hlaing was very ill. She had been demonstrating symptoms of typhoid fever and was steadily deteriorating. Ma Ni Mo Hlaing was administered gastric tablets and typhoid injections by the prison’s medical authorities, but her situation did not improved, prompting the prison’s resident doctor to qualify her condition as very serious.<sup>13</sup>

Ni Mo Hlaing’s mother and sister were able to visit on 27 October 2009. Her sister said they cried together when she visited her. *“Her face is very pale. She is skinny and has lost weight,”*<sup>14</sup> she said. It is known that typhoid fever can be fatal when appropriate medical treatment is not provided.

### **Other women political prisoners with reported health concerns:**

#### **Naw Ohn Hla (NLD)**



Naw Ohn Hla was sentenced, along with three other women, on 16 February 2010 to two years imprisonment with hard labour. Her husband is concerned for her health as she has a heart condition and blood pressure problems.<sup>15</sup> Naw Ohn Hla, is a member of NLD and was arrested in October 2009 after the women held weekly prayer services, asking for the release of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

#### **Daw Aun San Suu Kyi (NLD)**

Daw Aung Suu Kyi who has been under house arrest for the last 7 years has had occasional health problems. In May 2009 it was reported that she was suffering from

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<sup>11</sup> Mizzima 23 June 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Radio Free Asia, 30 August 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *Political Prisoner Ma Ni Mo Hlaing in critical condition*, AAPP 7 November 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Irrawaddy, 5 November 2009

<sup>15</sup> DVB 16 February 2010.

low blood pressure and dehydration.<sup>16</sup> In that same month reports emerged that she had pains in her legs, which affected her ability to sleep<sup>17</sup>.

**Noble Aye** (88 Generation)

Noble Aye was put into a punishment cell in September 2009. AAPP received information in September 2009, that she was ill from Hepatitis. She had previously been ill with jaundice in June 2009.

**Su Su Nway** (Labour activist)

Su Su Nwe has an underlying heart condition prior to her arrest in 2007, but has not received adequate medical care in prison. On 27 June 2008 she banged her head against the wall of her cell after an argument with prison officials, slightly injuring herself.

**Thin Thin Aye a.k.a. Mee Mee** (88 Generation)

Mee Mee was given a sentences of 65 years for her role in the August 2007 protest marches. She had on occasion suffered from a heart condition and was denied proper medical treatment. On 2 May 2008 reports from family said that her health was improving. However, in November 2009, she was weak and suffering from gout<sup>18</sup>.

**Yin Yin Wyne a.k.a Sizar** (88 Generation students)

In December 2008 it was reported that Yin Yin Wyne was suffering from a Gastric complaint and was limited to eating soft foods such as rice soup and that she vomited blood. In April 2009 she again was suffering from a gastric illness and headache.<sup>19</sup>

**Nilar Thein** (88 Generation students)

On 22 January 2009, family members of Nilar Thein were reported to be concerned about her health, having heard that she has a peptic ulcer. She was vomiting every day and when she went to see the doctor he told her to just go in for meditation and tell her beads.

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<sup>16</sup> Irrawaddy 9 May 2009

<sup>17</sup> Radio Free Asia 29 May 2009

<sup>18</sup> DVB 2 November 2009

<sup>19</sup> DVB 24 April 2009