Meet former Amnesty Prisoner of Conscience, Aung Khaing Min

Former Amnesty Prisoner of Conscience Aung Khaing Min will speak of his life experience as a human rights activist since the age of 14 in Myanmar (Burma) and also as a political exile based in Thailand who continues to campaign daily for human rights for his people.

Aung Khaing Min has been dedicated to the fight for human rights in Myanmar (Burma). But he has paid a heavy price for his activism—he has been unfairly imprisoned and tortured, lost the right to live in his home country, and forced to leave behind friends and family members still languishing in prison. Please refer to Amnesty International's interview with Aung Khaing Min for more details.

Come and meet Aung Khaing Min at one of the following engagements:

Wellington
When: Tuesday 12 October, 7:30-9:30pm
Where: C0119 Lecture Theatre, Cotton Building, Kelburn Campus, Victoria University.

Christchurch
When: Friday 15 October, 6:00-8:00pm
Where: The WEA Centre, 59 Gloucester Street.

Dunedin
When: Monday 18 October, 6:30-8:30pm
Where: Burns Lecture Theatre 2, Otago University, Arts Building, Otago University, 85 Albany St.

Auckland
When: Tuesday 19 October, drinks & nibbles from 6:30pm and the talk starting at 7:00pm.

Entry to all events are free but koha/donations are welcome.
Please bring two passport-sized photos to add to our photo petition calling for the release of all of Myanmar's Prisoners of Conscience, including Aung Khaing Min's family members.

For more details please contact Cyrille Koolhaas (phone: 09 303 4523, email: cyrilre.koolhaas@amnesty.org.nz).

Amnesty International is an independent movement of more 28 million people in over 150 countries who contribute their time, money and expertise to campaigning to end some of the worst violations of human rights worldwide.
AI: What was it like being a student activist in a country that has no problem in targeting opponents no matter how young they are?

AKM: As student activists we faced many difficulties: constant threats from the authorities; the Military Intelligence was always watching us and our families. We faced social exclusion, discrimination in the school system and loss of educational opportunities. I was expelled from high school, at 14, for meeting with fellow students to talk about human rights and democracy in Burma.

AI: What made you a human rights activist so young?

AKM: Growing up in Burma human rights violations are a part of daily life. My country has been under brutal regimes since 1962. I witnessed terrible violations such as killings, prolonged arrest, arbitrary detention, forced labor.

I knew the sacrifice you pay for the pursuit of democracy in Burma. You pay with your freedom and sometimes your life. While growing up I had older family members and friends in prison or in hiding.

At 14 years of age, I was involved in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising and witnessed human rights violations committed by the military junta, it was then that I realized my ultimate ambition was to become a human rights advocate and fight for human rights in my country.

I stepped forward as a student leader while at high school. I became the leader of the Myoma Student Union, Basic Education High School, Rangoon in 1989. I was chief of the Organizing Committee of the Student Union. I organized demonstrations calling for freedom and democracy in Burma and asking for the release of all student political activists who had been arrested by the regime.

I became one of the ten elected leaders of the 1996 December Student Democracy Demonstration, which broke out on December 2, 1996 while I was studying second year honors course (4th year in university) in International Relations at the University of Rangoon.

I led the demonstration calling for student rights, freedom and democracy. We opposed the Diamond Jubilee Ceremony of Rangoon University, which was being held by the regime, while thousands of students were still in prisons.

This opposition earned me seven years imprisonment.

AI: Weren't you scared?

AKM: I was terrified. As an activist in Burma you know how the Military Intelligence treats student activists. I had heard the stories from my brother and his friends who were in prison or hiding in the jungle, at the time. I knew what to expect but it doesn't make it any less terrifying.
When I was arrested on the morning of December 3, 1996, I along with one thousand other student demonstrators, we were surrounded by thousands of security forces with shields and batons. As a leader, I had to stand in the frontline — in front of the other students with the other leaders. From there I could see everything — the security troops approaching with their batons. I felt doomed but I had to pretend to be brave in front of the other students, as a leader they looked to me for support and strength. Then, the arrests began; I felt like I was drowning and it lasted forever.

I was dragged by several soldiers and students pulled me back to the other side. I was in the middle of a tug of war between security troops and students. Finally, I was arrested, dragged off and thrown into a truck. Everywhere students were being beaten, arrested and thrown into trucks.

After this, I was interrogated and then released. Between December 1996 to July 1997, I was interrogated four times before I was imprisoned in 1997 August. During these interrogation periods I was scared. Scared because there were many students on the run, my friends evading arrest and I wanted to avoid answering questions relating to their whereabouts. I didn’t want them to get caught and suffer the same fate as me. Finally, I was imprisoned and no more of my student group were arrested.

I’m not a hero or extraordinary. I am a normal guy. I was scared of being killed. I didn’t want to be tortured or beaten. But I loved my country and my people and this gave me the courage to do what I had to do when it needed to be done.

AI: How did you keep your spirits up during your time in prison and what experiences did you undergo there?

AKM: In prison, I met many student activists, veteran politicians, members of opposition parties and monks. We shared our own experiences and I came to know much more about the real situation in Burma. I also witnessed forced labor, portering and other human rights violations perpetrated by the prison authorities. I realized the true intention of the military dictators. They wanted our brains to be rusty, to numb our intellect. Political prisoners were not allowed pens or paper, books or any other learning materials. Throughout my time in prison, I was determined not to let the Burmese junta dull my mind. I tried my best to study in prison, though the consequences of getting caught were severe. I took out the filters from smoked cheroots (traditionally, filters of cheroots are made of pieces of newspapers) so I could read some English words and I used tablets as chalk on the cement floor of my cell to write with. When I managed to have some English books smuggled in I dug holes in the brick walls of my cell and hid the books and covered up the holes. I tried to study secretly in prison and I told myself, "You will lose if you spend your time in prison meaninglessly - you cannot let them win." Because of this dedication I learnt English in prison.

AI: When did you hear that AI considered you a Prisoner of Conscience and was working on your behalf?

AKM: When I arrived on the Thai-Burma border, I heard about Amnesty International and the great work they were doing to campaign for political prisoners. In Burma, we were cut off from the rest of the world. There was almost no international news getting inside prisons. You feel as though the world has forgotten you. Support from people outside of Burma provides hope for those in prison and serves as a reminder, even in their darkest hours, that the world has not forgotten them.

AI: How do you cope with being a refugee so far from home — away from family and friends?

AKM: Once I was free from jail I smuggled myself over the Thai-Burma border, where I joined a community based organization called the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) set up by former political...
prisoners. From Thailand, I wrote and distributed reports and press releases, raising awareness to the international community about prison conditions, arbitrary arrests and detention and human rights violations in Burma. This made me even more motivated toward a career in human rights advocacy. Living in Thailand as an illegal refugee, it was very hard because you always living in fear of being stopped by authorities, arrested and deported back to Burma.

In March 2005, I won a US Department of State Burma Refugee Scholarship and I arrived in the States in August 2005. Even though, I did not experience serious racial discrimination, as the town I lived was a small college town, sometimes people would shout at “Get back there and stay there” and “go home”.

Racism is often born out of ignorance. If people really know about the situation in Burma, why people flee from Burma and become refugees, what they have suffered in their lives, I think they will understand the lives of those living in exile.

Leaving Burma was not easy - it was a hard choice to make. I have not seen my mother for 7 years. My brother and sister-in-law are still in prison. Often I feel torn: I want to be in Burma, I want to be there for my family but I must work for my country. I lived in a prison in Burma and survived the excruciating prison life. Some of my friends and family remain in prison, some were re-arrested and imprisoned again, others died. They sacrificed their lives in the quest for a free and democratic Burma. As long as there are political prisoners in Burma, I will continue to work until they are all free.

AI: What are your views about the upcoming elections? What are you most hopeful about? What are you least hopeful about?

AKM: My wish is for the immediate release of all political prisoners in Burma.

The elections will not bring true democratic change to Burma. The elections are designed to legitimate and elongate military rule in the country. If they take place in the current context, with more than 2000 people languishing behind bars for peacefully exercising their basic civil and political rights, they won't come close to meeting international standards for free and fair elections. However, history tells us that brutal regimes do not last, and Burma is no different. For the Burmese people, the long walk toward a free society is not finished, but we must keep walking, and we will arrive one day.

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