

## Many Freed Burmese Weren't Jailed for Politics

By EDWARD WONG

22 January 2012

WASHINGTON — Fewer than half of the 651 prisoners the Myanmar government announced it was releasing 10 days ago were political prisoners, according to two human rights groups that have compiled lists of those released. Petty criminals, whose sentences are being commuted, were among the rest.

On Jan. 13, the government of Myanmar, once known as Burma, announced the prisoner release, a move that drew praise from the Obama administration and was immediately followed by the State Department's announcement that it would upgrade relations with Myanmar by exchanging ambassadors. It was unclear at the time how many of the prisoners were being held for their political views; some reports had said that political prisoners made up the vast majority, while others put the number somewhere in the hundreds.

Amnesty International recently confirmed that 274 were political prisoners, said Alison Mager, who works on Burma issues for the organization. A group based in Thailand, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, has put the count at 299, and has posted the list of names on its Web site.

Several groups have slightly varying lists of political prisoners who were released. The National League for Democracy, the opposition party led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, is keeping its own list.

In the 10 months since a civilian government took power, after five decades of iron-fisted military rule, Myanmar's president, the former general Thein Sein, has sought to reform the economy, ease political restraints and open the country economically and diplomatically.

But in a country scarred by one of the world's most repressive governments, many Burmese remain cautious about the gestures, and American officials said that President Obama was not yet considering lifting economic sanctions. The authoritarian government of China, Myanmar's most powerful ally and neighbor, is watching closely.

Ms. Mager said in an e-mail that Amnesty International was "thrilled to see anyone released at all," but she noted that none of the prisoners had been unconditionally released.

"Most had been convicted under vaguely worded security laws that allow long, sometimes life, sentences for the most minor of alleged offenses," she said. "The government's present position is that it would expect these newly released political prisoners to help 'nation build.' This apparently means that they will no longer protest their lack of liberty. They can be rearrested at any time and forced to serve out their entire sentence."

Among the most visible changes in Myanmar have been a surge in political debate among ordinary people and the open distribution of art and literature supporting the National League for Democracy. A spokesman for Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, who was released from years-long house arrest in November

2010, told reporters this month that she planned to run in a parliamentary by-election in April. Her party formally registered last month.

In June, the Burmese military ended a 17-year cease-fire with the Kachin Independence Army in the hills of northern Myanmar, and a bitter war is now unfolding there, with at least 60,000 civilians displaced in the region and about 7,000 refugees in China.

Mr. Thein Sein's government has been trying to reach cease-fire agreements with at least 11 groups engaged in civil conflicts with the Burmese military. A cease-fire with the Karen National Union was announced right before the prisoner release, but analysts say it is unclear whether the truce will have the support of the majority of the ethnic Karen. A State Department official said on Jan. 13 that the agreement reached with the Karen group needs "to be replicated across the country."

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