

Junta Charges 88 Generation Students

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About 20 well-known Burmese political prisoners including members of the 88 Generation Students group have been charged and could receive sentences of up to 20-years, according to sources close to the activists.

Student leaders including Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi as well as university students who took part in the Buddhist monk-led nationwide uprising in September 2007 have been charged under decree 5/96 dealing with obstruction or opposition to the National Convention.

Win Maung, the father of the 88 Generation Students leader Pyone Cho, recently visited Insein Prison. He told The Irrawaddy on Wednesday, "The new charges were approved on February 20. But, they [prisoners] haven't been sent to trial yet. University students were also among the group."

Decree 5/96, concerning opposition to the National Convention, was enacted in 1996, said Aung Thein, a lawyer in Rangoon. The National Convention was convened 14 years ago and charged with making recommendations for a draft constitution, which is set to go before voters in a national referendum in May.

Opposition to the National Convention includes leaflet distribution, public gatherings and lobby campaigns. Any person who organized or supported such activities could be charged, said Tate Naing, the secretary of the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma).

Tate Naing said the 5/96 decree increases the prison time the authorities can give the pro-democracy activists.

Some political prisoners, including Ba Tint and Ba Mint, were jailed by authorities in 2005 under decree 5/96, Tate Naing said.

The student leaders were previously charged under section 17/20 of Burma's Printing and Publishing Act.

Members of the 88 Generation Students group have been detained since they were arrested in August following their protests against a sharp increase in fuel prices. None has been sentenced by authorities.

Meanwhile, the health condition of detained 88 Generation Students members has improved, according to Tun Myint Aung, a member of the student group who is now in hiding.

According to the London-based Amnesty International, some 1,850 political prisoners are in Burmese prisons, and 96 persons remain unaccounted for following the September demonstrations. An estimated 700 political activists were arrested in September 2007.

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