

# Burma's Democracy Movement Turns 20

Saturday 15 March 2008, by [Wai Moe](#) (Date first published: 12 March 2008).

**Marking the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Human Rights Day in Burma on March 13, the military junta tightened security around the country with whispers of a fresh anti-junta movement circulating Rangoon.**

Burmese pro-democracy groups, including Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), proclaimed March 13 as "Burmese Human Rights Day" in 1989, a year after the supposed birth of the democracy movement in the country. The date is a memorial to honor the students, particularly the then senior students of Rangoon Institute of Technology, who were gunned down by the Burmese security forces on March 13, 1988.

Burma's late dictator, Ne Win, who led the Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) at that time, ordered the crackdown in March 1988 which led to the deaths of students Phone Maw and Soe Naing.

Inside Burma, any talk about Phone Maw, whose death at Rangoon Institute of Technology set off a chain reaction of demonstrations that led to the pro-democracy movement in March 1988, or of Human Rights Day is regarded by the authorities as a form of treason, and anyone caught can be charged under a state emergency act and sentenced to a lengthy imprisonment.

Burma has one of the worst human rights records in the world. According to a recent United Nations' report, some 1,850 political prisoners are behind bars. The report on Wednesday said: "Rather than stop unlawful arrests, the government had accelerated them."

Meanwhile, Rangoon residents told The Irrawaddy on Thursday that soldiers and riot police in uniform, accompanied by the junta-backed militia, Swan Ah Shin, were positioned at the corners of streets and junctions in the city, while others patrolled Rangoon, including university campuses in the outskirts of the city.

"This morning, I saw about five trucks loaded with riot police patrolling the city," said a man who lives in downtown Rangoon. "There's more security than in previous days and members of Swan Ah Shin are also on the streets."

Witnesses also said that military and police trucks, along with two fire engines, were placed at City Hall, adding that members of Swan Ah Shin and the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA) were holding walky-talkies and taking positions around the city.

"Since the early morning, soldiers, riot police and members of the USDA and Swan Ah Shin have been standing around crowded areas," said a woman from North Okkalapa Township.

Meanwhile, people in Rangoon say that there was a murmur around the neighborhoods that monks and students would re-launch an anti-military movement in advance of the referendum on the new constitution in May.

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) and the Forum for Democracy in Burma

(FDB) launched the “Free Burma’s Political Prisoners Now!” campaign on Thursday in Thailand to mark Burma’s Human Rights Day.

The groups jointly demanded the release of 1,873 political prisoners in Burma and condemned the use of systematic torture, the failed judicial system and the targeted harassment of political prisoners’ families. Ms Sunee Chairod, commissioner of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of Thailand, was among the main speakers at the campaign.

Bo Kyi, a human rights advocate with the AAPP (Burma), said that after 20 years of Burma’s people demanding human rights and democracy, “there is still no important improvement on human rights.”

A former student leader of the 1988 uprising who spent 16 years in prison told The Irrawaddy on Thursday: “Although the human rights record is becoming more and more repressive in Burma, the struggle for democracy is still alive.”

“I appreciate that people who were involved in the movement in March 1988 are still involved in our contemporary history,” he added. “Some people left the movement at a stop on the road to democracy. But those people who keep walking are finding more concrete ground for democracy.”

However, he said, it is not enough because the movement has not reached its goal and there is a lack of “common strategy.”

“Therefore, we the pro-democracy supporters should review our work as well,” he said.

“Then we can learn the lessons from our recent history and move forward.”

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\* From The Irrawaddy:

[http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art\\_id=10842](http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=10842)

\* Kyi Wai contributed to this article from Rangoon.