

Imprisoned Burmese prodemocracy activist awarded 2009 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights

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The Asian Human Rights Commission congratulates Mr Min Ko Naing, who is presently serving a prison sentence in Burma for fighting for democracy for his country, on receipt of the 2009 Gwangju Human Rights Award. We reproduce below the announcement of the May 18 Foundation on his being awarded the prize.

The situation regarding democracy and human rights in Myanmar/Burma remains dire. At this very moment, many pro-democracy activists are locked up in freezing cold cells. The international community has put pressure on Burma's military junta, taking consistent interest in the nation's pro-democracy movement. Despite its efforts, some countries around the world have turned a deaf ear to the issue due to conflicts of interest. After the military junta crushed the 'Saffron Revolution' with brutal force, the UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari visited Burma, meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi, a democratic leader of the country, in 2008. However, such efforts to demonstrate the international community's commitment to the region have been to no avail, and have only led to further disappointment with Burma.

Born in the Burmese capital of Yangon in 1962, Min Ko Naing organized the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), a nationwide student union, in 1988. Later, he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment for triggering the '8888 Uprising'. After being imprisoned for 15 years, he was released from prison and continued his pro-democracy resistance. Finally he was re-arrested and sentenced to 65 years imprisonment for organizing a demonstration which gave rise to the Saffron Uprising. He is currently serving this sentence.

According to an international human rights watchdog, the number of prisoners of conscience who, like Min Ko Naing, have been arrested and imprisoned for engaging in protests and anti-government activities, amounts to about 2000. In the aftermath of the devastating natural disaster which hit Burma in May 2007, the international community tried to reach out to the afflicted country. Burma's military junta, however, decided to reject this helping hand. To make matters worse, the authoritarian regime arrested and detained protesters, killing at least several hundred people, including foreign journalists, involved in the nationwide demonstration driven by saffron-robed Buddhist monks.

The 2009 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights Committee has therefore chosen Min Ko Naing to be this year's prizewinner. Min Ko Naing and his colleagues have devoted themselves to Burma's democratization, and it is their devotion that we hope to remember and share as we commemorate the May 18 Gwangju Uprising. The committee sincerely desires that Min Ko Naing and other political prisoners be released as soon as possible, and hopes that democracy will truly take root in this country.

2009 Gwangju Prize for Human Rights Committee

Chairperson: Moon Young-hee, Vice President of Korea Democracy Foundation

Committee	Members:
Kim Chil-jun, Secretary-General of National Human Rights Commission	
Yoon Gwang-jang, Chairman of the May 18 Memorial Foundation	
Lee Jung-hyun, Korea National Assembly	
Cha Sung-hwan, Director of Pusan Democratic Memorial Association	