



# *Action by Christians Against Torture*

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*When we see others as the enemy, we risk becoming what we hate. When we oppress others, we end up oppressing ourselves. All of our humanity is dependent upon recognising the humanity in others.*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

**ACAT (Harrow Group) will hold a Zoom meeting on Wednesday March 23 from 8.00 to 8.40pm and you are very welcome to join us. We intend to use the meeting to pray for victims of persecution and also to talk about writing letters of appeal on their behalf, in case you would like to do this. We shall be sending out further information about this meeting but meanwhile, do contact Anne-Marie\*, Elspeth or Margaret\* if you would like the Zoom code for the meeting.**

*\*contact details at the end of this newsletter.*

## **In Memoriam**

December 26, 2021, saw the death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu aged 90. He will be remembered not only as a charismatic and courageous campaigner against apartheid in South Africa but also for the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the post-apartheid period. This was an exercise in which perpetrators of atrocities were invited to tell their stories honestly and, in exchange for the truth, were given full or partial amnesty, while victims and their families were compensated. Some criticised the Commission's work as "letting the villains off" but Tutu insisted that everyone was capable of

repentance and that those who forgave were peacemakers.

Meanwhile Tutu continued to denounce certain politicians for their corruption or cruelty even including some who had played a leading role in fighting for racial equality in Africa in the past, such as Robert Mugabe and Jacob Zuma. He also denounced Aung San Suu Kyi for her failure to defend the Rohingyas against persecution in Myanmar and Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians. He stood up for the Dalai Lama against China and his forcefully expressed views on fairness and justice qualified him in most eyes to be a worthy recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. In these difficult days for South Africa and the world as a whole he will be much missed,

## **Myanmar**

It is a year since the Tatmadaw, the army of Myanmar, overthrew the government of Aung San Suu Kyi, claiming that her recent election victory was the result of voter fraud. Since then she has been imprisoned and found guilty of a variety of trumped up charges. The demonstrations which followed the coup were violently suppressed, towns where there was still resistance were razed by the army, villages terrorised and thousands have fled their homes. The persecution of individual civilians continues and it has been estimated that, since the coup, 1,500 people have been killed by the Tatmadaw and at least 9,000 detained.

Individual examples of this include our prayer case for this month, **Min Nyo**, the first journalist to be sentenced by a military court since the coup. In January a military court sentenced Phyto Zayar Thaw, a member of

Aung San Suu Kyi's party, to death under an anti-terrorism law and a prominent democracy activist, Kyaw Min Yu, received the same sentence.

However resistance continues, partly in the form of civil disobedience, such as a refusal to pay electricity bills and strikes by public sector workers, but also by numerous armed groups which carry out guerrilla ambushes. Furthermore there are reports of growing unity among the groups. Numerous Barmars (ethnic Burmese) have publicly apologised to the Rohingyas for their past persecution by Barmars and links are also being formed between Barmar opposition groups and other ethnic groups, such as the Kachin, who have opposed the central government for years. There is also a government in exile, the National Unity Government, led by Dr Sasa.

Nonetheless Dr Sasa's government has yet to receive international recognition and family members of those who have joined the opposition are threatened by the army and sometimes publicly distance themselves from the opposition. The Tatmadaw itself is well armed, receives supplies from Russia and China and is said to number 300,000 troops. A rights monitoring group, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, has reported that so far eight of the people arrested for taking part in civil disobedience have died in military interrogation centres and seven of their bodies showed signs of torture. Yet despite this brutal repression, resistance to the Tatmadaw seems to be growing. As Aung San Suu Kyi herself has said "The only real prison is fear and freedom is freedom from fear".

## **China**

China is rarely out of the spotlight these days but the winter Olympics in Beijing have focused attention on the country even more. The persecution of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the clampdown on democratic movements in Hong Kong have been denounced internationally. Prominence has also been given to the case of the tennis player, Peng Shuai, who disappeared for a while after

accusing a top communist official of sexual assault. She has reappeared and claimed that she had been misunderstood but questions remain unanswered as to how truly free she is.

Possibly less well known are the many activists and human rights workers who have been silenced. Our prayer case for January, a human rights lawyer called **Chang Weiping**, has courageously made public the tortures inflicted on him in prison since his initial arrest in 2020. In fact it appears that since 2013 there has been a widespread system of jails in China into which victims may vanish for up to six months to face isolation and torture. It is called "residential surveillance at a designated location" (RSDL) and it has been estimated that since 2013 up to 57,000 people have been through RSDL, with 15,000 being held in 2020, the last year in which figures were documented.

Meanwhile, as I write we are still waiting for more news of **Zhang Zhan**, our prayer case of January 2021, sentenced to 4 years in prison for reporting on Covid19 in Wuhan. She is reported as being on partial hunger strike and is said to be close to death. *Reporters Without Borders* (RSF) has joined other organisations in urging President Xi Jinping to exonerate and release her and mentions other defenders of press freedom who have been in danger in Chinese prisons. For instance, according to RSF, Kunchok Jinpa, a leading source of information about Tibet for journalists, died in February 2021 as a result of mistreatment while in detention. The RSF World Press Freedom Index ranks China 177<sup>th</sup> out of 180, an unworthy position for a nation with so much enterprise and ability.

**For further information on the work of the Harrow group of ACAT, contact: Anne-Marie Dennis, 54 Elm Drive, North Harrow, Middx, HA2 7BY or Margaret Davies, (020) 8907 1957, email: Johndavies99@aol.com**