

Anthony Albanese speaks with Sean Turnell following release from Myanmar jail

By political reporter [Matthew Doran](#) and South East Asia correspondent [Mazoe Ford](#) in Bangkok

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Sean Turnell with Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Angela Corcoran shortly after his release. *(Supplied: Penny Wong/Twitter)*

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese says Australian man Sean Turnell is in remarkably "good spirits" after being released from a Myanmar jail.

The economist landed in Bangkok on Thursday night after spending 650 days behind bars.

Professor Turnell had been working as an adviser to ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi when the military junta arrested him after its coup in February last year.

"He's not a large man, for those of you have seen photos of him, and clearly he has lost weight," Mr Albanese said.

Key points:

- Sean Turnell has spent 650 days in a Myanmar jail
- Anthony Albanese says Professor Turnell has kept his sense of humour
- He will travel from Bangkok to Australia, escorted by Australian diplomats

"But he was in he was in very good spirits, it must be said, but he's been checked over.

"We need to make sure after 650 days — and he was clearly counting them, he said to me this is day 650 — that can have a physical toll, but it can have other health tolls as well.

"We need to bear that in mind, and we need to give him the space to recover."

Mr Albanese said Professor Turnell would now travel on to Australia, escorted by Australian diplomats, and he was receiving health support at the airport.

Food drops 'in tote bags with Australian crest'

He recounted a story Professor Turnell had told him over the phone about food drops from Australia's embassy in Myanmar.

"They'd be in tote bags with the Australian crest on it," Mr Albanese said.

"He said that normally his food would be served in a bucket but he would get this food and ... he would put the tote bags where the bars were on the cell in which he was being detained, so that both he could see — and the guards who were detaining him could see — the Australian crest, so that he could keep that optimism.



Anthony Albanese says Sean Turnell has kept his sense of humour. (*ABC News: Matt Doran*)

"And the Australian crest of course, with the kangaroo and emu, they don't go backwards."

Mr Albanese said Professor Turnell's sense of humour had not been diminished, despite his time locked away.

"He is from my electorate and apologised for not voting at the election," Mr Albanese joked.

"I assured him he wouldn't be fined, and that was understandable."

'He was doing his job — nothing more, nothing less'

Mr Albanese praised the advocacy of ASEAN nations in lobbying for Professor Turnell's release — notably ASEAN chair, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Mr Albanese refused to answer whether Professor Turnell's extradition would open the door to Australia imposing sanctions on the military junta.



Sean Turnell with his wife, Dr Ha Vu. *(Supplied)*

But he did take the opportunity to question why Professor Turnell was ever jailed in the first place.

"He was there doing his job as an economic policy adviser.

"He was doing his job — nothing more, nothing less, and he's very good at his job.

"And he's a proud Australian, and today, I think we should all be proud of him."

Thousands more prisoners yet to be released

Professor Turnell was one of almost 6,000 prisoners freed as part of an amnesty to mark Myanmar National Day.

Human rights activists say many more are still languishing behind bars in the strife-torn south-east Asian nation.

"None of the foreigners who have been detained ... should have been in detention for one minute, and now they are out but there are 13,000 other prisoners to be released," Debbie Stothard from the Altsean Burma Network told the ABC.

Ms Stothard said it was important to increase international pressure on Myanmar as it continues to target opponents of the military regime.

"We are expecting a harsher crackdown as the junta tries to gain control in the lead up to sham elections it plans to hold in 2023," she said.

"There's going to be more resistance to these sham elections and there's going to be a harsher crackdown, and we mustn't take our eyes off this situation."