



Cases Against Organizers on Karen Martyrs' Day Must be Dropped Immediately

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The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) condemns the arrest of three Karen organizers who were brought to a police station for questioning on Karen Martyrs' Day in Yangon on 12 August 2020. Ma Sein Htwe is being charged under Article 19 of the Peaceful Procession and Peaceful Assembly law for organizing last year's Karen Martyrs' Day event. The two young men, Saw Hsar Kwar Lar, and Sa Thein Zaw Min were released from police custody, but are facing charges under Article 20 of the same law. Although the men were discharged, they were told by the authorities to wait for further information about their case within the next 15 days. Every year, Karen people of all ages come together to celebrate our history by paying tribute to our revolutionary leaders, including Saw Ba U Gyi and others. It is unacceptable that the Karen and other ethnic groups cannot hold respective Martyrs' Day peacefully.

The organizers had informed the authorities about the event, which was set to be held from 8 AM to 2 PM. However, there was resistance from the Burma police who came and arrested the organizers around 10:30 AM, threatening those in attendance to wrap up the event or else they would take away all their materials. In response, the participants stood their ground in solidarity with the arrested organizers and said they would not stop until they were released. Fear of arrest eventually prompted most of the attendees to take down posters and banners.

It is disappointing to see that the basic ethnic rights and efforts to preserve Karen identity continue to be disrespected under the rule of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led civilian government. Their actions undermine democratic values and the integrity of our ethnic history as a pillar of solidarity and testimony to the Karen struggle, especially as Burmese Martyrs' day celebrations go on every year without any objections or disruptions. This double standard shows how oppression against ethnic identities continues.

This is not the first time the NLD government has attempted to censor the activists of the Karen Martyrs' Day event. Last year, community organizers were also forbidden to use the word 'martyr' in our celebration. This is a serious attack on our culture, history and traditions. Indeed, there cannot be unity without recognition of past attacks. These persistent attempts to delegitimize the history of Karen Martyrs speak to a greater narrative of systematic efforts by the NLD to disempower ethnic people.

We are calling on Kyauktada police to drop the cases of Saw Hsar Kwar Lar and Sa Thein Zaw Min. We also call on the Kyauktada court to drop charges against Ma Sein Htwe immediately and for the NLD to take seriously its commitment to building a democratic federal union by respecting ethnic history. It is time to take action and treat all ethnic people equally with respect.

Media Contact

1. Naw K'nyaw Paw +66 810295503 (English, Karen, Burmese)
2. Naw Hser Hser +95 9255 817 092 (English, Karen, Burmese)