

BURMA INDIA SOLIDARITY

ANNOTATIONS FROM HERSTORY OF BURMA

Aung San Suu Kyi is the youngest daughter of Aung San, a student leader, editor, and founder of the 'Tatmadaw' (armed forces) in Burma. He is known as a staunch freedom fighter and leader of the armed struggle, founder of the Communist Party of Burma and the Socialist Party of Burma. General Aung San was also the first premier who led the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and formed the 'post-independence' government after a deal with the British. He led the 'independent' nation for a brief stint at the head of an anti-fascist alliance, but was assassinated at the young age of 32, in 1947 along with his entire cabinet, and his brother, by his political rivals. He is still revered as the Father of the Nation and is highly respected across Myanmar and the world.

The AFPFL was at the helm of a young democracy, led by U Nu, an ally of General Aung San. It aligned with China and the communists. Significantly, under Aung San, most ethnic minority groups like the Chin, Kachin and Shan—barring the Karen and a section of the communists and the army—joined the government. Since then, this legacy has been largely troubled; most ethnic minority communities in the border states have been totally or partially alienated from the mainland regime led by the dominant Bamar majority community. This conflict continued under the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, as much as under various military regimes.

The next coup was led by Ne Win, the second-in-command of Aung San. The army thereafter ruled Burma for 50 years since 1962 until a semblance of

democratic reforms were introduced very late in 2011. The change was a quasi-democracy with Aung San Suu Kyi at the helm, but it created its own flip side of reforms, education, free market and social mobility, globalisation, internet freedom, free media and social media, international interactions, etc. A young, liberal and progressive generation was gradually getting rid of the suffocating baggage of the ruling military apparatus.

Earlier, the '8888 uprising' began on 08.08.1988. It was led by students of 'Rangoon' with huge participation of citizens, especially Buddhist monks. It was brutally crushed.

In 1990, Suu Kyi's party, National League for Democracy, won an overwhelming victory in the elections. She was not allowed to assume power by the military top brass despite this internationally sanctioned victory with a majority of Burmese people voting for her party—almost 81 per cent. Instead, she was imprisoned. She remained under arrest for 21 long years, house arrest for 15 of these years, received the Noble Prize for Peace, became an international symbol of peace and democracy, and a friend of the Western media and the Western free market democracy project in Burma.

In 2020-2021, her overwhelming election victory, reducing the military-backed party into a miserable minority, triggered yet another coup. She was reportedly not on good terms with General Aung Hlaing in recent times. Ironically, she did not denounce the army and General Hlaing during the genocide of the Rohingyas, which led

to mass exodus of tens of thousands of brutalized survivors to Bangladesh. Now, the same army general has put her in prison in an unknown location, charged with flimsy and fake charges, such as possessing 'walkie-talkies'. Most of her colleagues in the party, including top leaders and elected representatives, are also in prison.

General Hlaing, leading the Tatmadaw, at the sanitised army fortress of Nay Pyi, is himself under the scanner for his reported links with arms and business dealers, and is allegedly caught up with the business interests of the army. For instance, the most popular beer in the country is an army product: the 'Myanmar Beer' produced by the Myanmar Brewery. It is reported that people have now started boycotting army products, including this particular beer.

General Hlaing has had political ambitions; his retirement was due in July 2021. He leads the military's electoral and political front, Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which lost the last elections. As many as 25 per cent seats are reserved for the army in parliament—they are not elected representatives. Besides, the crucial ministries of defense and interior are controlled by it.

Evidently, such a Constitution could have been only drafted by the army. A civilian government is thereby constantly being controlled by the army top brass. Political observers call it a 'flawed and fledgling democracy'.

**Burma India solidarity is a monthly news and perspective update from a network of groups and individuals associated with South Asian Solidarity Collective*

A WORD ABOUT 'BURMA'/'MYANMAR'

It was a decision of an army regime in July 1989 to change the colonial name of Burma to Myanmar (to sound like the local language name 'Mranma'/'Myanma') as per the recommendations of a Commission set up to draft the 'Adaptations of Expression Law'. However, both due to the issues of legitimacy of the said military government and their appointed language commission as well as due to the fact that 'Myanmar', instead of being inclusive of all ethnic minorities, aims to legitimise majoritarian politics in Burma, the Indian people's solidarity groups since the 1980s—like the 'Friends of Burma' and Burma Solidarity Group—and international human rights groups have stuck to referring to the country as 'Burma'.

LATEST UPDATES: DISSENT AND DEATH SENTENCES



ဒဂုံတက္ကသိုလ်ကျောင်းသားများသမဂ္ဂ (ဒတကသ) Dagon University Students' Union (DUSU)

Statement No: - 14/22
December 1, 2022

Statement on the 7 Dagon University students sentenced to death by the military group

Dagon University students Ko Thant Zin Win, Ko Thura Maung Maung, Ko Zaw Lin Naing, Ko Thiha Htet Zaw, Ko Hein Htet, Ko Thet Paing Oo, Ko Khant Lin Maung Maung were sentenced to death on November 30th, 2022. These students were arrested in April 2022 and were alleged by the military group in connection with the Global Treasure Bank shooting that occurred in said month.

Imposing the death penalty on the students is an act of vengeance by the military that is not hesitant to spifflicate any opposition. As capital punishment is prohibited by societies in the world, the actions of the military group are blatant violations of human rights and the right to life. In addition, this punishment imposed on the students highlights the tragic situation in the country's courtrooms and the collapse of the entire legal system after the military coup.

As the military council is only a terrorist group that has illegally seized power of the state, it should be known that all the judicial orders imposed by the terrorist group uphold no validity. Therefore, the Myanmar Police Force, Prisons Department, and Justice Department who participated in the decision of capital punishment on the students, will be held accountable.

We would like to strongly urge international governments and organizations that value human rights to use all possible measures to prevent the Military Council from imposing arbitrary capital punishment on Myanmar students and citizens.

We would like to exhort the public to fight back against the terrorist group that imposed capital punishment on the young students.



Central Executive Committee
Dagon University Students Union

After arresting protesters, doctors, nurses, journalists, intellectuals and dissenters, even foreigners, on fake charges, the latest human rights violations by the Junta are the series of death sentences passed by it. In a recent statement (see above) the Dagon University Students Union (DUSU) has stated that seven of its students were sentenced to death on November 30, 2022. They were arrested in April 2022. "Imposing the death penalty on the students is an act of vengeance by the military..." the DUSU statement said. "We would like to exhort the public to fight back against the terrorist group that has imposed capital punishment on the students."

Earlier, in a stunning announcement that outraged the world, the Junta announced in July 2022 that it hanged four political prisoners, including a well-known lawmaker and popular hip hop singer from the National League for Democracy, a democracy activist and two men accused of violence after the coup. This, despite widespread pleas for clemency from across the world,

including from the UN, and Cambodia, which heads the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

These were the first death sentences carried out in Myanmar since decades. The absence of a proper trial, and the brazen injustice of it all, was crudely transparent. The hangings have shocked Burma and the world. The underground National Unity Government immediately stated that it will take 'revenge'.

Reported in the official 'Mirror Daily' newspaper, those hanged included Phyo Zeya Thaw, former lawmaker, Kyaw Min Yu, leader of the 88 Generation Students Group, already in jail since 12 years, Hla Myo Aung and Aung Thura Zaw, who were convicted of killing an army informer. Elaine Pearson, director of Human Rights Watch, Asia, called this "grossly unjust and politically motivated military trials". She said, "The junta's barbarity and callous disregard for human life aims to chill the anti-coup protest movement."



CARPET BOMBING AND KILLINGS OF CIVILIANS

A recent attack on a school is yet another instance of the ongoing brutality being waged by the army. A Burmese student in a border state told 'The Citizen' that the September 16 attack in 2022 on a school in the Let Yet Kone village in the north-western Sagaing region, which left a dozen children dead, led to anger across Burma. The people now are not helpless, the student said, they have the PDF, which will fight back. A wave of mourning stalked the entire country after these killings of school children.

The United Nations' investigators said that commanders who ordered the attack should be tried for "war crimes". The school was reportedly located in a monastery, and it came under attack, first, from helicopters firing rockets and machine guns, followed by an infantry attack. The United Nations' Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (IIMM) said in a statement that the attack "may be considered a war crime with commanders criminally liable". The IIMM, under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Council, said it was investigating to "assess criminal responsibility". "Armed attacks that target civilians are prohibited by international laws of war and can be punished as war crimes or crimes against humanity," it said.

The AFP quoted school teachers who said that some children were playing in the open while others were in the classroom when two helicopter gunships opened fire with heavy weapons. Shocked and terrified, they saw a wounded child screaming in pain. The child was "begging to die", the teachers said.

The Junta responded by declaring that the air raid was a consequence of a 'tip-off' that armed guerrillas from the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), an ethnic, rebel group, fighting for an independent state since many years, and a local 'anti-coup militia', were moving arms and ammunitions in the area. The army claimed that civilians are used as human shields by the guerrillas, and that it has seized explosives and mines from the village.

In another recent air raid, at least 60 persons were reported to have died after they were bombed during a concert in the northern state of Kachin. The heads of diplomatic missions in Myanmar from the UK, the US, and other Western countries issued a joint statement strongly condemning the air attack. "This attack underscores the military regime's responsibility for



crisis and instability in Myanmar and the region, and its disregard for its obligation to protect civilians," the statement said.

'Nikkie Asia' reported from Bangkok and Yangon (formerly, Rangoon) that international human rights groups roundly denounced the deadly air bombing. Cambodia, in its capacity as the current chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, also issued a statement following the attack. "ASEAN is gravely concerned over the recent escalation of violence in Myanmar, including the airstrike in Kachin," the statement said. The Kachin Independence Army

controls the northern state. Most of the victims appear to be civilians. The number of dead may end up as high as 80.

The military has set up checkpoints on roads, preventing the injured from being transported to nearby hospitals, according to a person involved in the rescue operation. The army has defended the airstrike as a necessary response to insurgents, and maintained that the jets targeted a Kachin Independence Army base. It has dismissed reports of scores of civilian deaths as "rumours".

MASS DISPLACEMENT AND UNDERGROUND STRUGGLE

In November, the guerrilla forces attacked a police/army camp in Mon. Five soldiers were killed. Soon after, air raids bombed the villages nearby, leading to mass exodus and displacement of hundreds of villagers. The refugee camps across the country are also in pathetic condition, with severe lack of food, drinking water, medicines and other resources, even while they are hounded by the army and informers, and people live in constant fear of being picked up, tortured or killed.

'The Guardian' had earlier reported (June 1, 2021) that the people have been left with no other choice but to go underground and wage a guerrilla war after the coup in February, 2021. Peaceful protests were brutally crushed after the coup, thousands put in jail, and at least 1,000 protesters were killed. "They just have no other option left," said Dr Sasa, spokesperson for Myanmar's NUG, which has been set up by pro-democracy politicians, including politicians from the National League for Democracy. The constant threat of military raids, arrests, torture and killings have pushed communities and citizens to take up arms, he said. "It is just the beginning. The situation will become out of control. Even if it is one man in a village, they will not just bow in front of these murderers. It is the whole country on the road to civil war," Sasa said.

Consequently, hundreds of students, professionals, doctors, teachers, among others, have gone underground, and have joined the rebel guerilla force, the People's Defense Force (PDF) led by the NUG. Attacks by the PDF, including in Yangon and army camps, are routine, and so is the military retaliation—either through the infantry or air raids—on suspected camps, or on villages suspected of sheltering rebel armies.

These rebel forces include people from the majority and dominant Bamar community as well, who too have tasted the fruits of democracy and globalisation. While the ethnic, minority armed groups have been waging a war for independence in the broader states for decades, this phenomena of urban, educated citizens and professionals joining the underground movement for democracy is happening for the first time in Burma. In many instances, the PDF has made alliances with the ethnic armed groups. Political observers point out that the few years of democracy with Aung Saan Suu Kyi at the helm, including the emergence of media and social media freedom, and the benefits of higher education and a global outlook, has changed the world-view of the current generation, especially aspirational youngsters. They are now refusing to live under the oppressive and corrupt army rule. They crave for democracy and freedom.

Earlier, 'The Guardian' had reported that in the last week of May, 2021, "tens of thousands of people have been displaced in eastern Kayah state by intense fighting between the military, the newly formed Karenni People's Defence Force and the Karenni Army, an established ethnic armed group". The military used helicopters to bomb and fire at civilian fighters, the Karenni People's Defence Force told local media.

At least 58 defence forces have been formed across the country, of which 12 are active, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), an NGO. These groups are formed at a local level and are not necessarily officially linked to the NUG.

UNDERGROUND REBELS AT THE THAI BORDER

Rebecca Tan of the 'Washington Post' reported in early October this year about a tea shop named 'Freedom' at the Thailand-Myanmar border, and how it has become a centre for the armed rebels and refugees. She writes: "Food is cooked over a gas stove by a 53-year-old woman forced to flee her home because of her support for the Myanmar opposition, and served by teenage waiters targeted by authorities for attending pro-democracy demonstrations. Customers pay at a counter staffed by a young woman with long hair and a sweet smile—a former kindergarten teacher who refused to work under the generals! 'I'll be a saint in the time of the Buddha', reads a Burmese poem scribbled with a marker on a fridge... 'I'll revolt in the time of the dictator'!"

She reports, "More than 176,000 Myanmar nationals have crossed into Thailand since the military takeover, according to the International Organization for Migration. Thousands more are arriving through the jungles every month, desperate to escape the junta's brutal crackdown on the opposition... Past the border, the lucky ones get picked up by humanitarian organizations. But far more rely on informal networks of support. Rebel soldiers break bread with military defectors in 20-square-foot rooms rented out by resistance leaders and activists. Doctors, factory workers, farmers and orchestra players crowd into empty safe houses, sharing mats to sleep on. 'We're trying to stand together,' said Thet Swe Win, who leads the crew behind the 'Freedom' tea shop. 'It's the only thing we can do...'"



Photo credits: Saw Wunna

KANGAROO COURTS AND REPRESSION ON MEDIA

Meanwhile, a series of arbitrary arrests were reported. On September 29, Australian academic Sean Turnell, an adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi, was sentenced to three years in prison after a 'closed trial'. Turnell has been an economist at Sydney's Macquarie University. He was arrested on February 6, 2021, after the coup. Among others arrested were a top model, a leading doctor, a Japanese documentary filmmaker, a BBC journalist, and a former British ambassador.

Several journalists are in prison. The Citizen reported that a Junta court handed a BBC journalist, Htet Htet Khine, her 'second' three-year prison sentence. In an alleged special court inside the notorious Insein Prison in Yangon, no evidence could prove that she was guilty. However, she was declared guilty of operating for the NUG. Earlier, she was given a sentence of 'hard labour' by a Bahan Township court. She was picked up in August last year, along with eminent columnist Sithu Aung Myint. She was charged for giving shelter to Myint in her house.

'Detained Journalists Information Myanmar', a group documenting the condition of journalists, claims that 142 journalists have been arrested since February 1,

2021. At a press conference, the Junta warned that "it would deal harshly" with those who donate money to the NUG or other resistance groups.

After the coup, the International Federation of Journalists reported that five major media organisations in Myanmar had their licenses cancelled. The media outfits included DVB, Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Now and 7 Day News. Most journalists have gone underground, operating mostly alone in undisclosed locations, risking their lives each moment.

Meanwhile, in November, under severe pressure from the international community, especially Australia, UK and Japan, almost 6,000 political prisoners, dissenters and pro-democracy activists were released from jail. Major General Zaw Min Tun, army's spokesperson, confirmed to VOA News that one artist, an election commission official, one minister of the ousted government, as well as four foreigners are among the released. Among those freed were Sean Turnell, adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi, former British ambassador to Burma, Vicky Bowman and her Burmese artist husband, Htein Lin, US citizen Kyaw Htay Oo and Japanese documentary filmmaker Toru Kubota.

SOUTH ASIAN SOLIDARITY

On December 5, 2022, students from the Nepal Students Union protested in front of the Myanmar Embassy at Kathmandu in Nepal against the military's repressive actions in Burma. Some students were arrested by the

Nepal Police. The students declared, "Reinforcing the voice for democracy, in solidarity with those who are fighting for it! ...We stand with all the people sentenced to death for standing for what they believe in."

The Burma-India Solidarity Group is a Collective of journalists, academics, writers, filmmakers, students and women's groups, trade unions, among others. This update is largely based on media reports.