

Myanmar: Promote press freedom, and end reprisals against Development Media Group

(Bangkok, 3 October 2019) – The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) strongly condemns the harassment of the Development Media Group (DMG) and its Chief Editor, Aung Marm Oo. We call on the authorities of Myanmar to put an end to the reprisals against DMG, and take all steps necessary to promote press freedom in the country.

DMG is an outspoken, independent media outlet that covers sensitive issues in Rakhine State, including human rights violations and alleged abuses by the state perpetrators. On 1 May 2019, Aung Marm Oo, Chief Editor of the DMG, was charged under Section 17 (2) of the Unlawful Association Act, which prohibits the ‘the management or promotion or assistance of an unlawful association.’ If found guilty, Aung Marm Oo may be sentenced for up to five years in prison, as well as a fine.

Five months since charges were filed, authorities have yet to formally clarify for the prosecution of DMG and relevant persons.¹ The law itself is vaguely formulated and contains ambiguous provisions to enable it to be used to stifle media organisations and human rights defenders, who report on armed conflict.

The authorities have also delayed the issuing of licenses for the production of News Journal, DMG’s bi-monthly publication, despite the DMG’s compliance with licensing requisites,² compromising its ability to provide much needed information to communities.

Press and media freedom remain elusive in Myanmar. In past decades, journalists have been charged with a variety of repressive laws, covering issues such as defamation and trespassing, including by the use of Section 66 (D) of the Telecommunication Law.

In early 2019, for example, the Irrawaddy and Radio Free Asia faced defamation charges filed by the Tatmadaw, Myanmar’s military, following their reporting on military operations in Rakhine State. This has created a chilling effect among independent media, particularly those reporting on armed conflicts and human rights violations.³

In the case of DMG, the harassment followed shortly after the Internet shutdown in conflict-affected areas, including Rakhine and Chin States.

FORUM-ASIA is concerned that the Government is curtailing press freedom to escape accountability for crimes against humanity perpetrated in Rakhine State and other conflict-affected areas. FORUM-ASIA calls on the Government of Myanmar to:

¹ DMG Statement on opening a lawsuit against the Chief Editor, the delay of issuing licenses for news agency and journal publishing and news blackout by Internet shutdown in conflict affected areas of Arakan and Chin states, 1 September 2019

² DMG Letter Requesting to provide an assistance to be issued publishing licence for the Development News Journal and licence for Development Media Group news agency, 28 May 2019

³ <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/special-branch-sues-editor-sittwe-based-publication-dmg.html>

- Drop all charges against Aung Marm Oo and other members of DMG;
- End the use of reprisals against journalists and media organisations;
- Grant licences to DMG and allow them to freely and independently continue their media work in line with journalism ethics; and
- Lift the ban on Internet access in conflict- affected areas.

At a time of increased international scrutiny, the Government should demonstrate it is committed to abiding by international human rights standards, including through the promotion of genuine press freedom.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 81 member organisations in 21 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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