



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

KHRG condemns the arrest and detention of participants in a Karen Martyrs' Day event

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KHRG strongly condemns the arrest of Saw Thein Zaw Min, Saw Hser Kwar Lar and Daw Sein Htwe at an event to celebrate the 70th Karen Martyrs' day near Yangon's Maha Bandula Park on August 12th 2020.

Karen Martyrs day commemorates the death of Karen revolutionary leader Saw Ba U Gyi and of all those who have given their lives for the freedom of the Karen people. Although it is widely celebrated among Karen communities, the Yangon authorities have recently cracked down on this celebration. The arrests made on August 12th targeted two organisers and one attendee, leading to the premature interruption of the event.

On August 10th, the Kyauktada Township authorities denied the organisers permission to hold the event, citing restrictions on mass gatherings to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The chief of the Kyauktada Police Force, Myo Thet, also vowed to sue them under the Communicable Disease Law should they violate COVID-19 restrictions. The organisers then said they would scale down the ceremony by allowing no more than 15 people at a time to pay their respects. They also provided attendees with masks and hand gel, and they did not hold a march as part of this year's event.

Sa Thein Zaw Min and Saw Hser Kwar Lar were ultimately released on the same day. However, the police notified them that they would be charged under section 20 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law within 15 days. Daw Sein Htwe was kept in police custody and will face charges related to her participation in an October 2019 rally in solidarity with three Karen activists who were sentenced to 15 days in prison for holding a Karen Martyrs' Day event. The pattern could not be clearer.

The Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession law only requires organisers to submit a notification ahead of public events, but authorities often misuse this requirement to arbitrarily deny permission. KHRG strongly condemns the use of this law to curtail the right to freedom of assembly of ethnic minority activists, prevent them from holding events to celebrate their culture and history. The Myanmar government claims to be working toward national reconciliation, but crackdowns and detentions will only create further divisions. There cannot be national reconciliation while ethnic minorities are denied the right to hold commemorative events.

The Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession law is applied with extreme prejudice against ethnic people. The Burmese were able to celebrate Martyr's Day in July and 8888 uprising anniversary in August without repercussions from the state. However, when Karen people attempted to celebrate Karen Martyrs' Day in the same manner, they were met with oppression and abuse at the hands of the authorities.

KHRG strongly urges the Myanmar government to drop all charges against these three activists. People who are peacefully exercising their legitimate right to freedom of assembly are not criminals, and under no circumstances should they be treated as such.

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