

Burma Dismiss The Charges Against Kachin Peace Protesters

The Burma Human Rights Network is calling on authorities to dismiss charges against three Kachin protesters accused of defamation following mass protests between April 30th and May 6th. The protesters called on the evacuation of civilians from conflict areas after fighting displaced more than 6,000 people in Tanai, Injangyang, Hpankant and Mogaung townships. Following the protests, two were fined 30,000 Kyat for violating the peaceful assembly law section 19. Afterwards, Ko Lum Zawng, U Zaw Jat and Daw Nang Pu were charged in violation of penal code section 500 for defamation of the Military.

“The charges against these protesters are clearly intended to intimidate and silence any opposition to Myanmar’s ongoing civil war in its north. A free society should not fear protest and calls to protect its own civilians, and this case is a worrying sign of continued erosion of Burma’s limited liberties. What is perhaps most worrying is that the call of these protesters was only to protect and rescue civilians from conflict, a call that should be considered common decency and not a criminal offense,” said BHRN Executive Director Kyaw Win.

The protests and arrest follow an increasing offensive by the Burmese forces against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in what is widely considered the oldest civil war in the modern world, having begun in 1961, paused in 1994 and resumed in 2011. Civilians have suffered the brunt of the conflict and over 140,000 civilians have been internally displaced, with those living in areas controlled by the KIA intentionally cut off from aid by Burmese authorities.

The three defendants are being tried together on June 4th. Their lawyer has argued the case be annulled due to anomalies in the charges. In particular, the three are being charged collectively for accusations said to have occurred in different separately by the individual clients.

According to the Freedom of Expression Activist Organization there are 45 protesters in Burma being sued in 14 separate cases following protests in May. The organization said seven cases from were from Yangon region, three from Mandalay, two from Kachin and two from Bago.

The war in the Kachin region is often considered a forgotten or ignored conflict, garnering little attention from the world and even less political will to end it. The conflict is often considered to be centered on control of gems and other resources in the region such as timber. As a result civilians continue to be displaced, with no foreseeable time they can return home to peace. The conflict has also resulted in numerous accusation of egregious human rights violations by the military.

Burma must drop charges against Ko Lum Zawng, U Zaw Jat and Daw Nang Pu and the 42 others being sued in the country. A free society depends on open dialogue, dissent and should never fear peaceful protest. Attempts to silence protesters only further signals to the world that Burma has not transitioned to the democratic society it was intended to be and that repressive practices continue.

Note for Editors

Conflict in Kachin State was renewed in 2011 with the breakdown of a 17-year bilateral ceasefire between the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Myanmar military, also known as the Tatmadaw. Since then, 120,000 people have been displaced and more than 350 villages destroyed by armed conflict. The Tatmadaw says it launched the current strikes in gold- and amber-rich Tanai as a way to cut off a KIA source of income and protect Myanmar's natural resources; the KIA describes the recent offensives as an attempt at a territorial grab. The KIA and its allies are not signatories to Myanmar's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, whose terms they say are dictated by the undemocratic and military-drafted 2008 Constitution.

Background on the Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN)

Burma Human Rights Network (BHRN) is based in London and operates across Burma/Myanmar works for human rights, minority rights and religious freedom in Burma. BHRN has played a crucial role advocating for human rights and religious freedom with politicians and world leaders.

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