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Myanmar military court jails 144 villagers detained after massacre

Junta troops suspect the villagers were helping Arakan Army insurgents closing in on the state capital.

By RFA Burmese
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Sittwe Prison in Rakhine state on Oct. 6, 2018. (RFA)

Myanmar's junta jailed 144 civilians for supporting insurgents more than three months after they were detained following a massacre of [nearly 80](#) people in their village, which residents blamed on junta troops, families of the detained told Radio Free Asia on Monday.

Relatives of the jailed residents of Byain Phyu in Rakhine state dismissed the convictions, denying they had supported Arakan Army insurgents, who have been making significant advances on the battlefield against the military.

“How can we support the AA when day to day we’re struggling ourselves and hardly making ends meet?” said a relative of one of those jailed on Friday under a

law against unlawful association by a military court in the main prison in the western city of Sittwe.

“But the court didn’t accept this and convicted them anyway.”

Byain Phyu is on the outskirts of Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state, and junta forces have been keen to ensure that AA fighters can not dig into positions there from which to attack the city.

Shortly after the May 29 killings, a junta spokesman said the military had conducted a clearance operation there and rebel forces had attacked with “drone bombs and artillery”.

At the time, the military said it found bunkers built from sandbags in houses throughout the village, which it said were positions for AA soldiers.

The military detained some 300 villagers at the time. Only four people on trail on Friday were found not guilty, residents said, adding that more than 150 more were due to be tried by the court on Monday.

The AA has made unprecedented gains in fighting in Rakhine state since late last year, leaving junta forces increasingly confined to pockets of territory, including Sittwe.

A Sittwe resident, who also declined to be identified for safety reasons, said junta forces were enraged by their setbacks and were taking out their frustration on civilians.

“Sources close to the court told us before that only 38 people would be jailed and the rest would be released, but days before the verdict, the Sittwe-based Regional Command Headquarters was attacked with heavy weapons by the Arakan Army,” he said.

“It seems as if the attack might have caused casualties, so they convicted the villagers.”

Neither the junta’s main spokesperson, Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun, nor the Rakhine states junta spokesperson, Hla Thein, responded to attempts by RFA to contact them for information.

Byain Phyu is largely deserted now with nearly 2,000 of villagers sheltering in monasteries and schools in Sittwe, residents said, with junta troops deployed to prevent anyone returning.

In Sittwe, nervous junta soldiers are conducting many checks and detaining people, residents said.

The AA has also made gains in both the north and south of Rakhine state.