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Aid workers arrested, killed amid junta crackdown in Myanmar

Authorities have accused volunteers of aiding rebels and sentenced several to lengthy jail terms.

By RFA Burmese
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An office of the Kawt San Nai Social Aid Organization is seen in Kyaikhto township in Mon state, Myanmar. (Kawt San Nai Social Aid Organization in Kyaikhto township via Facebook)

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Myanmar's junta is increasingly targeting aid workers under the pretext that they are supporting the country's armed opposition, arresting more than 20 in Mon state since June, according to members of civil society groups.

Since the military seized power in a February 2021 coup d'état, aid groups have filled significant gaps in social services under junta rule – stepping in to deliver much needed food and supplies to the displaced, assist with recovery efforts following natural disasters, and provide critical medical care and burial services for civilians caught in the crossfire of Myanmar's years-long civil war.

But volunteers told RFA Burmese that as rebel groups have enjoyed more success on the battlefield in recent months, the junta has increasingly accused their organizations of “aiding terrorists,” putting them at risk and creating a chilling effect on the crucial work they do.

Sources with ties to volunteer organizations said that since June the military has arrested more than 20 aid workers in Mon state alone, eight of whom have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms under Myanmar’s Counter-Terrorism Law.

At least four aid workers were murdered over the same period of time in the Mandalay region, and none of the cases have been solved by authorities, said the sources, who spoke to RFA on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

Arrests in Mon state

On Oct. 9, three members of the Ownerless Social Aid Association in Mon state’s Thanbyuzayat township, including the group’s chairman, were arrested and charged with anti-terrorism laws for allegedly supporting the anti-junta People’s Defense Force, or PDF, said a source close to the organization.

“The chairman, the driver, and the chief financial officer were prosecuted for supplying the PDFs with one sack of rice and 50,000 kyats (US\$25), three viss (1 viss = 3.6 pounds) of dried fish and rice, and 200,000 kyat (US\$95), respectively,” the source said.

Local PDF units were formed by civilians to protect their communities from the military and many have pledged allegiance to the country’s shadow National Unity Government, or NUG, made up of officials deposed in the coup.

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In June, the military arrested four volunteers with the Kawt San Nai Social Aid Organization Association in Mon’s Kyaikhto township and five from the Lamaing Youth’s Social Aid and Rescue Organization, including the group’s chairman, and charged them under the Counter-Terrorism Law, sources said.

The military also arrested aid workers in Mon’s Mawlamyine, Ramanya, Bilin, Thahton and Mudon townships and sentenced them to long prison terms, they said, adding that civilians in need of medical care died because of the resulting suspension of humanitarian aid.

Beyond Mon state, junta authorities arrested six members of the Thukha Kari Social Aid Association in Sagaing region's Sagaing township during the first week of May for allegedly supporting the PDF.

Four killed in Mandalay

The crackdown on aid workers may have contributed to an sense of impunity for the unidentified gunmen who on Sept. 25 arrested and killed Soe Win, the chairman of the Moe Metta Social Volunteers Organization, in Mandalay region's Ngazun township and three other volunteers from the same group the following day, a resident told RFA.

“The chairman was arrested first and then killed,” said the resident. “The next day, a senior member [of the group] and his nephew were also arrested at the same time [as well as a third aid worker]. Later, they were killed and their bodies were thrown into a garbage dump. We still don't know which group killed them.”



An ambulance belonging to the Lamaing Youth's Social Aid and Rescue Organization in Ye township, Mon state, Myanmar, is seen Oct. 7, 2024. (Lamaing Youth's Social Aid Rescue Organization via Facebook)

The killings took place in Ngazun's Moe Taung village, where the military and pro-junta militias are known to operate, as well as the PDF, the resident said.

RFA has been unable to independently confirm who was responsible for the killings.

Chilling effect on aid groups

An aid worker, who also declined to be named, said that volunteer groups now feel under threat and unable to operate because of the crackdown.

“At present, most of the relief groups in Mon state have suspended their ambulance services [because of the risk],” said the aid worker. “Earlier, we were able to take rural patients who needed intensive treatment to major hospitals in Yangon and Mawlamyine cities. But these days, the junta won’t even allow us to transport patients in critical condition.”

When asked about the crackdown, Saw Kyi Naing, the junta’s spokesperson and social affairs minister for Mon state, said that he hadn’t heard of the arrests.

“People who abide by the rules and directives can travel freely because all of the groups have been registered,” he added.

Attempts by RFA to contact junta spokesperson Major Gen. Zaw Min Tun about the arrest and jailing of aid workers went unanswered Tuesday.

Translated by Aung Naing. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Malcolm Foster.

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