

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	378
Land:	Myanmar
Kilde:	AP News
Titel:	Myanmar military uses systematic torture across country
Udgivet:	28. oktober 2021
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	13. januar 2022

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Myanmar military uses systematic torture across country

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October 28, 2021 GMT

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — The soldiers in rural Myanmar twisted the young man’s skin with pliers and kicked him in the chest until he couldn’t breathe. Then they taunted him about his family until his heart ached, too: “Your mom,” they jeered, “cannot save you anymore.”

The young man and his friend, randomly arrested as they rode their bikes home, were subjected to hours of agony inside a town hall transformed by the military into a torture center. As the interrogators' blows rained down, their relentless questions tumbled through his mind.

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"There was no break – it was constant," he says. "I was thinking only of my mom."

Since its takeover of the government in February, the Myanmar military has been torturing detainees across the country in a methodical and systemic way, The Associated Press has found in interviews with 28 people imprisoned and released in recent months. Based also on photographic evidence, sketches and letters, along with testimony from three recently defected military officials, AP's investigation provides the most comprehensive look since the takeover into a highly secretive detention system that has held more than 9,000 people. The military, known as the Tatmadaw, and police have killed more than 1,200 people since February.

While most of the torture has occurred inside military compounds, the Tatmadaw also has transformed public facilities such as community halls and a royal palace into interrogation centers, prisoners said. The AP identified a dozen interrogation centers in use across Myanmar, in addition to prisons and police lockups, based on interviews and satellite imagery.

The prisoners came from every corner of the country and from various ethnic groups, and ranged from a 16-year-old girl to monks. Some were detained for protesting against the military, others for no discernible reason. Multiple military units and police were involved in the interrogations, their methods of torture similar across Myanmar.

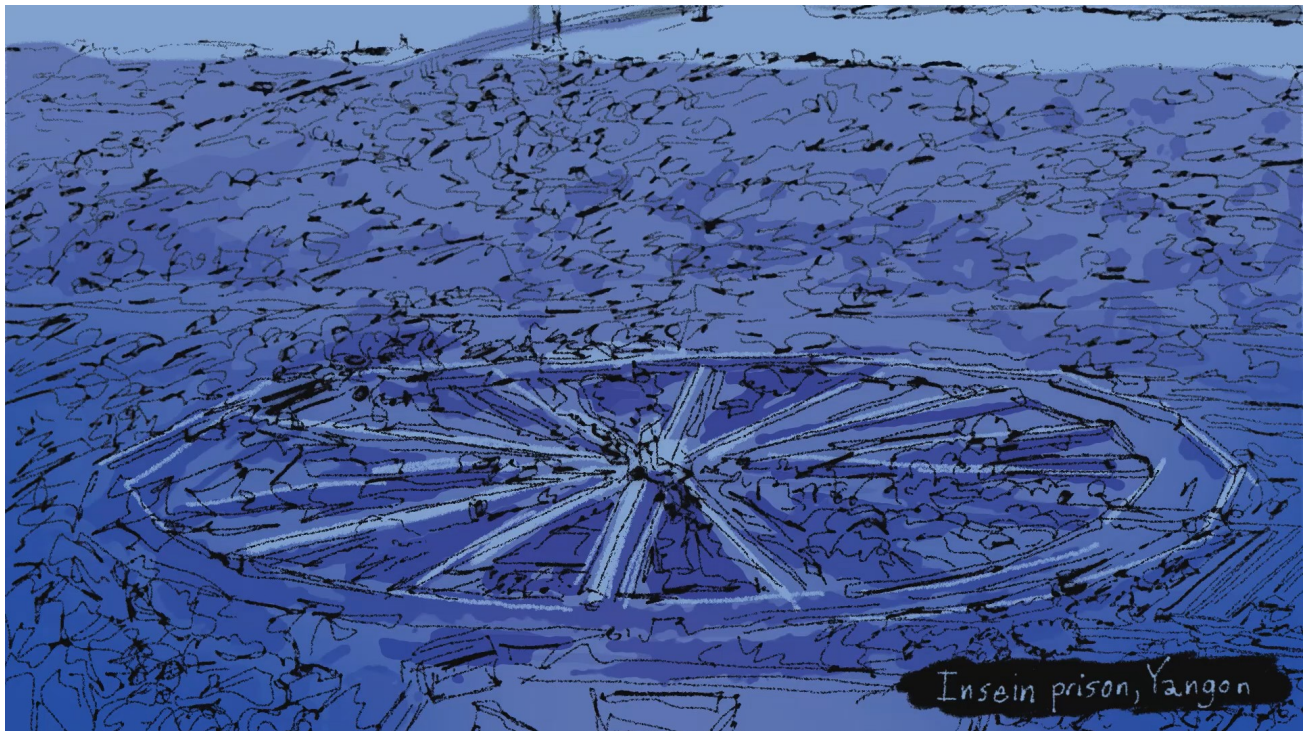
The AP is withholding the prisoners' names, or using partial names, to protect them from retaliation by the military.

Inside the town hall that night, soldiers forced the young man to kneel on sharp rocks, shoved a gun in his mouth and rolled a baton over his shinbones. They slapped him in the face with his own Nike flip flops.

"Tell me! Tell me!" they shouted. "What should I tell you?" he replied helplessly.

He refused to scream. But his friend screamed on his behalf, after realizing it calmed the interrogators.

“I’m going to die,” he told himself, stars exploding before his eyes. “I love you, mom.”



The Myanmar military has a long history of torture, particularly before the country began transitioning toward democracy in 2010. While torture in recent years was most often recorded in ethnic regions, its use has now returned across the country, the AP’s investigation found. The vast majority of torture techniques described by prisoners were similar to those of the past, including deprivation of sleep, food and water; electric shocks; being forced to hop like frogs, and relentless beatings with cement-filled bamboo sticks, batons, fists and the prisoners’ own shoes.

But this time, the torture carried out inside interrogation centers and prisons is the worst it’s ever been in scale and severity, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors deaths and arrests. Since February, the group says, security forces have killed 1,218 people, including at least 131 detainees tortured to death.

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The torture often begins on the street or in the detainees' homes, and some die even before reaching an interrogation center, says Ko Bo Kyi, AAPP's joint secretary and a former political prisoner.

"The military tortures detainees, first for revenge, then for information," he says. "I think in many ways the military has become even more brutal."

The military has taken steps to hide evidence of its torture. An aide to the highest-ranking army official in western Myanmar's Chin state told the AP that soldiers covered up the deaths of two tortured prisoners, forcing a military doctor to falsify their autopsy reports.

A former army captain who defected from the Tatmadaw in April confirmed to the AP that the military's use of torture against detainees has been rampant since its takeover.

"In our country, after being arrested unfairly, there is torture, violence and sexual assaults happening constantly," says Lin Htet Aung, the former captain. "Even a war captive needs to be treated and taken care of by law. All of that is gone with the coup. ... The world must know."



Lin Htet Aung told the AP that interrogation tactics are part of the military's training, which involves both theory and role playing. He and another former army captain who recently defected say that the general guidelines from superiors are, simply: We don't care how you get the information, so long as you get it.

After receiving detailed requests for comment, military officials responded with a one-line email that said: "We have no plans to answer these nonsense questions."

Last week, in an apparent bid to improve its image, the military announced that more than 1,300 detainees would be freed from prisons and the charges against 4,320 others pending trial would be suspended. But it's unclear how many have actually been released and how many of those have already been re-arrested.

All but six of the prisoners interviewed by the AP were subjected to abuse, including women and children. Most of those who weren't abused said their fellow detainees were.

Myanmar's systemic abuse

A map of verified locations where prisoners have been detained and, in some cases, tortured. The sites were identified through interviews with former detainees and satellite photo analysis.

In two cases, the torture was used to extract false confessions. Several prisoners were forced to sign statements pledging obedience to the military before they were released. One woman was made to sign a blank piece of paper.

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All prisoners were interviewed separately by the AP. Those who had been held at the same centers gave similar accounts of treatment and conditions, from interrogation methods to the layout of their cells to the exact foods provided — if any.

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The AP also sent photographs of several torture victims' injuries to a forensic pathologist with Physicians for Human Rights. The pathologist concluded wounds on three victims were consistent with beatings by sticks or rods.

"You look at some of those injuries where they're just black and blue from one end to the other," says forensic pathologist Dr. Lindsey Thomas. "This was not just a swat. This has the appearance of something that was very systematic and forceful."

Beyond the 28 prisoners, the AP interviewed the sister of a prisoner allegedly tortured to death, family and friends of current prisoners, and lawyers representing detainees. The AP also obtained sketches that prisoners drew of the interiors of prisons and interrogation centers, and letters to family and friends describing grim conditions and abuse.

Photographs taken inside several detention and interrogation facilities confirmed prisoners' accounts of overcrowding and filth. Most inmates slept on concrete floors, packed together so tightly they could not even bend their knees.

Some became sick from drinking dirty water only available from a shared toilet. Others had to defecate into plastic bags or a communal bucket. Cockroaches swarmed their bodies at night.

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– VIDEO ONLY ON AP: Myanmar detainees systemically tortured

There was little to no medical help. One prisoner described his failed attempt to get treatment for his battered 18-year-old cellmate, whose genitals were repeatedly smashed between a brick and an interrogator's boot.

Not even the young have been spared. One woman was imprisoned alongside a 2-year-old baby. Another woman held in solitary confinement at the notorious Insein prison in Yangon said officials admitted to her that conditions were made as wretched as possible to terrify the public into compliance.

Amid these circumstances, COVID ripped through some facilities, with deadly results.

One woman detained at Insein said the virus killed her cellmate.

"I was infected. The whole dorm was infected. Everyone lost their sense of smell," she says.

The interrogation centers were even worse than the prisons, with nights a cacophony of weeping and wails of agony

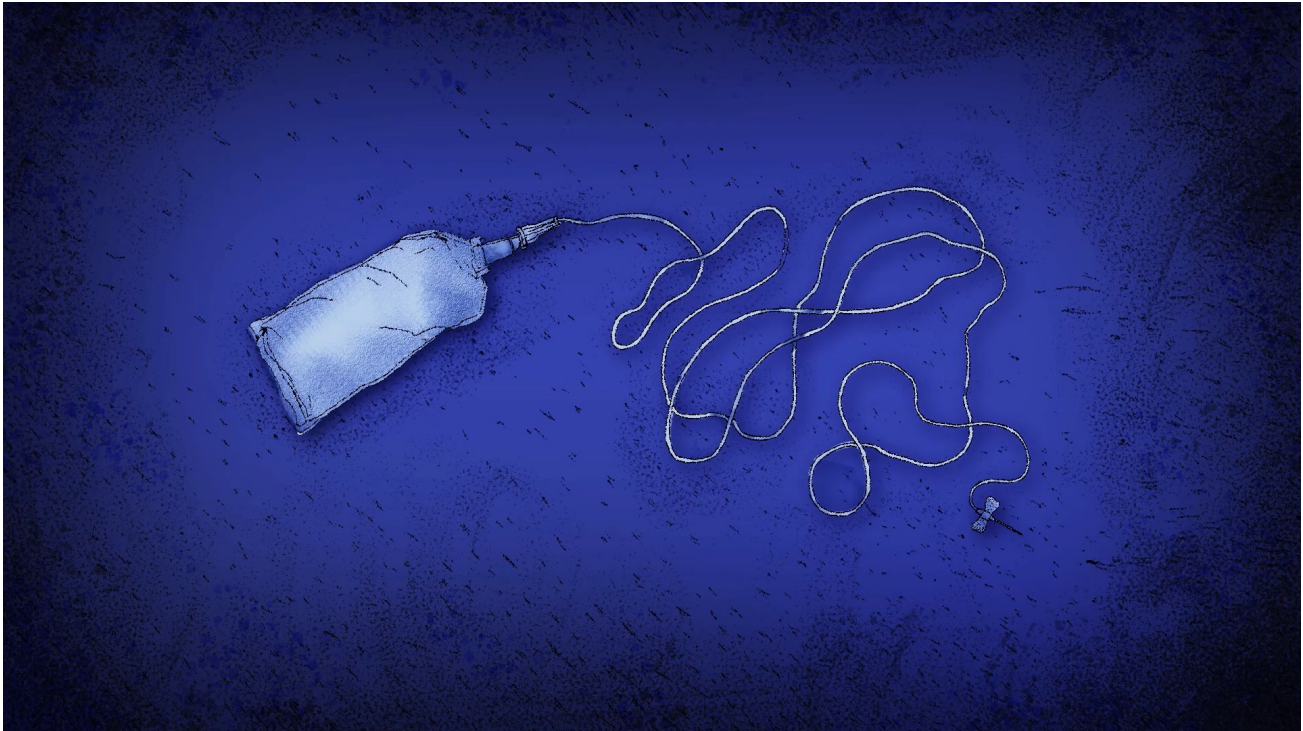
"It was terrifying, my room. There were blood stains and scratches on the wall," one man recalls. "I could see smudged, bloody handprints and blood-vomit stains in the corner of the room."

Throughout the interviews, the Tatmadaw's sense of impunity was clear.

"They would torture us until they got the answers they wanted," says one 21-year-old. "They always told us, 'Here at the military interrogation centers, we do not

have any laws. We have guns, and we can just kill you and make you disappear if we want to — and no one would know.”

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The tortured prisoners were already dead when soldiers began attaching glucose drip lines to their corpses to make it look like they were still alive, a military defector told the AP. It was one of multiple examples the AP found of how the military tries to hide its abuse.

Torture is rife throughout the detention system, says Sgt. Hin Lian Piang, who served as a clerk to the North-Western Regional Deputy Commander before defecting in October.

“They arrest, beat and torture too many,” he says. “They did it to everyone who was arrested.”

In May, Hin Lian Piang witnessed soldiers torture two prisoners to death at a mountaintop interrogation center inside an army base in Chin state. The soldiers beat the two men, hit them with their guns, and kicked them, he says.

After the men were put into jail, one of them died. The major in charge asked the military's medical doctor to examine the man and determine his cause of death. Meanwhile, the other prisoner began trembling and then died, too.

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The soldiers attached the drip lines to the prisoners' corpses, then sent them to a military hospital in Kalay.

"They forced the Kalay military doctor to write in the chest biopsy report that they died from their own health problems," Hin Lian Piang says. "Then they cremated the dead bodies straight away."

Hin Lian Piang says the direct order to cover up the cause of the men's deaths came from Tactical Operations Commander Col. Saw Tun and Deputy Commander Brig. Gen. Myo Htut Hlaing, the two highest-ranking army officials stationed in Chin state. The AP sent questions about the case to the Tatmadaw but they were not answered.

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Though the Tatmadaw has been open about many of its brutalities since the takeover — killing people in broad daylight, releasing photos on state TV of detainees' bruised faces — it has used modified torture techniques and false statements to hide evidence of other widespread abuse.

Several prisoners say their interrogators brutalized only the parts of their bodies that could be hidden by clothes, which Hin Lian Piang calls a common strategy. One prisoner had his ears repeatedly slapped, leaving no scars but inflicting intense pain. Another, Min, says his interrogators placed a rubber pad over his chest and back before beating him with a rod, minimizing bruising.

"They would just make sure to hit you so that only your insides are damaged, or would severely beat you on your back, chest and thighs, where the bruises aren't visible," says Min.

The use of rubber pads appears to be a classic example of “stealth torture,” which leaves no physical marks, says Andrew Jefferson, a Myanmar prisons researcher at DIGNITY, the Danish Institute Against Torture.

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“It seems to indicate that the torturers actually sort of care about being found out,” Jefferson says. “So few ever get convicted that I don’t really understand why they care.”

The military may be attempting to pre-empt public accounts of its abuses, says Matthew Smith, cofounder of the human rights group Fortify Rights.

“This is a technique that dictatorships have used for a very long time,” he says. “What I believe the authorities are attempting to do is at least inject some level of doubt into the allegations that that survivor or that person or human rights groups or journalists or governments may accuse them of.”

One prisoner, Kyaw, said he was tortured for days and freed only after signing a statement that he had never been tortured at all.

Kyaw’s hell began when the military surrounded his house and detained him for the second time since February for his pro-democracy activism. As the soldiers beat him and hauled him away with five of his friends, his mother wet her pants and fainted.

His usually stoic father began to cry. Kyaw knew what he was thinking: “There goes my son. He’s going to die.”

All the way to the interrogation center in Yangon, soldiers ordered them to keep their heads bowed and beat them with their guns. When Kyaw’s 16-year-old friend became dizzy and lifted his chin, a soldier bashed his head with a gun until he bled.

At the interrogation center, the soldiers handcuffed them, chained them together and put bags over their heads. His first night was a blur of beatings. “Rest well tonight,” one soldier told him.

The next morning, none of the detainees could open their swollen mouths enough to eat their rice. It was the only food Kyaw would receive for four days. He drank from the toilet.

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His interrogation began around 11 a.m. and lasted until 2 or 3 a.m. The soldiers poked his thighs with a knife. They zapped him with a taser. They rolled iron rods up and down his legs.

They learned he could not swim, and kicked him into a lake, blinded by the bag on his head and paralyzed by handcuffs that bound his hands behind him. He thrashed and flailed, sinking ever deeper. They eventually yanked him out.

Their questions were monotonous. “Who are you and what are you up to?” they demanded. “I really didn’t do anything,” he replied. “I know nothing.”

Another 100 detainees arrived at the center while he was there, some of their faces so disfigured from beatings they no longer looked human. A few could not walk. One detainee told Kyaw that soldiers had raped his daughter and her sister-in-law in front of him.

On the fourth day, Kyaw’s family called on a friend with military connections to intervene, and the torture stopped. But he was still held for three weeks until the tell-tale swelling in his face went down.

Kyaw was finally released after he paid military officials around a thousand dollars. The officials then made him sign a statement saying that the military had never asked for money or tortured anyone. The statement also warned that if he protested again, he could be imprisoned for up to 40 years.

Kyaw does not know if his friends are still alive. But against his mother’s pleas, he has vowed to continue his activism.

“I told my mother that democracy is something we have to fight for,” he says. “It won’t come to our doorsteps just by itself.”

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The soldiers forced the 16-year-old girl to her knees, then ordered her to remove the mask meant to protect her from COVID.

“You are not afraid of death – that’s why you are here,” one soldier sneered. “Don’t pretend like you are scared of the virus.”

Of the prisoners interviewed by the AP, a dozen were women and children, most of whom were abused. While the men faced more severe physical torture, the women were more often psychologically tortured, especially with the threat of rape.

Sixteen-year-old Su remembers kneeling with her hands in the air as a soldier warned, “Get ready for your turn.” She remembers walking between two rows of soldiers while they taunted, “Keep your strength for tomorrow.”

Su pleaded in vain for soldiers to help one of her fellow inmates, a girl even younger than she, whose leg was broken during her arrest. The soldiers refused to let the girl call her family.

Another girl, around 13, cried constantly and fainted at least six times the day they were arrested. Rather than call a doctor, officers sprayed the child with water.

Prison officials warned Su never to speak of what happened inside to people on the outside. “They said, ‘We really are nice to you. Tell the people the good things about us,’” Su says. “What good things?”

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Su had never stayed apart from her parents before. Now she was barred from even calling them, and had no idea that both her grandfathers had died.

“As soon as I was released, I had to take sleeping pills for nearly three months,” Su says. “I cried every day.

Inside Shwe Pyi Thar interrogation center in Yangon, the women grew to dread the night, when the soldiers got drunk and came to their cell.

“You all know where you are, right?” the soldiers told them. “We can rape and kill you here.”

The women had good reason to be frightened. The military has long used rape as a weapon of war, particularly in the ethnic regions. During its violent crackdown on the country’s Rohingya Muslim population in 2017, the military methodically raped scores of women and girls.

“Even if they did not rape us physically, I felt like all of us were verbally raped almost every day because we had to listen to their threats every night,” says Cho, an activist detained along with her husband.

Another young woman recalls her four months in a southwest Myanmar prison, and the constant fear of torture and rape.

“I was locked in the cell and they could call me out at any time,” she says.

A teacher, held for eight days at an interrogation center, learned to fear the sound of the cell door.

“Our thoughts ran wild, like: ‘Are they coming to take me? Or are they coming to take her?’” the teacher says. “When we saw them blindfolding someone, we were extremely anxious because that could be me.”

Not every woman was spared from violence. Cho's cellmate was beaten so severely with a bamboo stick that she could not sit or sleep on her back for five days. And though Cho was not subjected to physical assaults at Shwe Pyi Thar, officers at Insein prison struck her on the back of her neck and forced her into a stress position.

When she objected, they beat her back and shoulders, then banished her to solitary confinement for two weeks.

For another woman, Myat, the beatings began the moment the soldiers burst into her home, smashing the butts of their guns into her chest and shoving a rifle into her mouth. As they arrested her and her friends, she heard one of them say: "Shoot them if they try to run." She cries while recounting her ordeal.

One 17-year-old boy endured days of beatings, the skin on his head splitting open from the force of the blows. As one interrogator punched him, another stitched his head wound with a sewing needle. They gave him no pain medication, telling him the brutal treatment was all that he was worth. His body was drenched in blood.

After three days, he says, they took him to the jungle and dumped him in a hole in the ground, burying him up to his neck. Then they threatened to kill him with a shovel.

"If they ever tried to arrest me again, I wouldn't let them," he says. "I would commit suicide."

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Back inside the rural town hall, the young man ached for his mother as his night passed in a haze of pain. The next morning, he and his friend were sent to prison.

His small cell was home to 33 people. Every inch of floor was claimed, so he lay next to the lone squat toilet.

An inmate gently cleaned the blood from the young man's eyes. When he looked at his friend's battered face, he began to cry.

After two days, his family paid to get him out of prison. He and his friend were forced to sign statements saying they had participated in a demonstration and would now obey the military's rules.

At home, his mother took one look at him and wept. For a month afterward, his legs and hands shook constantly. Even today, his right shoulder — stomped on by a soldier — won't move properly.

He is constantly on edge. Two months after his release, he realized he was being followed by soldiers. When the sun goes down, he stays inside.

"After they caught us, I know their hearts and their minds were not like the people's, not like us," he says. "They are monsters."

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Gelineau reported from Sydney. Associated Press journalist Sam McNeil in Beijing contributed to this report.

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