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Junta arrests reporter, celebrities who criticized deadly Myanmar military airstrike

By RFA Burmese

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Authorities in Myanmar have arrested a journalist and three celebrities who criticized the junta's bombing of a village in Sagaing region that killed 200 people, including children, a source with knowledge of the country's legal system said Friday.

Kyaw Min Swe, a reporter in Yangon, actress May Pa Chi, and vocalists Shwe Yi Thein Tan and May La Than Sin were charged on Thursday with violating Article 505 (a) of Myanmar's penal code for "inciting public unrest," a Yangon-based justice lawyer told RFA Burmese. The junta has routinely used Article 505 (a) to prosecute those who oppose its rule in the 26 months since it seized power in a coup d'etat.

"Kyaw Min Swe was handed over to the Sanchaung township police station yesterday," said the lawyer, who spoke on condition of anonymity

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citing security concerns.

“A complaint was opened against actress May Pa Chi and [vocalist] Shwe Yi Thein Tan under Article 505 (a) at the North Dagon township police station last night, and vocalist May La Than Sin has been charged under the same article ... in East Dagon township,” he said, adding that May La Than had been arraigned in court on Thursday.”

The lawyer said that all four had been charged for allegedly inciting the public against the junta by posting messages to their Facebook accounts opposing the junta’s April 11 air raid on the opening ceremony of a public administration building in Kanbalu township’s Pa Zi Gyi village, believed to be one of the deadliest attacks on civilians in Myanmar since the February 2021 coup. The attack has drawn condemnation from across the globe.

He said the four had been arrested by junta security forces on April 11 and 12 and taken to an interrogation center in Yangon, where they were held prior to being charged.

Kyaw Min Swe was the editor-in-chief of The Voice Weekly magazine. He also served as the secretary for the Myanmar News and Media Council.

Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders on Friday condemned the journalist’s arrest and called for his “immediate and unconditional release” in an emailed statement to RFA.

“Kyaw Min Swe’s arrest is yet another confirmation of the absolute terror journalists have to face in Myanmar,” said Daniel Bastard, head of the group’s Asia-Pacific desk, calling it “all the more shocking” that the arrest was related to his reaction to the bombing of Pa Zi Gyi.

“It is a common pattern for war criminals to try and erase any kind of comment regarding their crimes, and this is precisely what the junta is

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trying to do in shutting down journalists like Kyaw Min Swe," Bastard said.

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According to reports compiled by journalists, the junta has killed three local members of the media and arrested more than 150 since the coup.

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UN failure to condemn

Reports of the four arrests came as criticism mounted against the United Nations Security Council for failing to speak out against the April 11 airstrike.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, as well as several Western governments and human rights organizations, issued statements condemning the junta's use of deadly force against civilians.

Myanmar's permanent representative to the U.N., Kyaw Moe Tun, who the junta has charged with high treason for accepting his appointment to the world body by the shadow National Unity Government, said on April 13 that it is "painful for the people of Myanmar" to see the Security Council's inaction on the attack.

On April 15, Zin Mar Aung, the NUG's minister of foreign affairs, echoed Kyaw Moe Tun's frustration, telling reporters that the U.N. and the Security Council – particularly member countries with veto power – have an obligation to hold the junta to account for the airstrike and other atrocities.

China and Russia, both of which have maintained close ties with the junta since the coup, make up two-fifths of the council's permanent members with veto power, along with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France.

Myanmar's military confirmed in a statement last week that it had carried out a "precision" attack on Pa Zi Gyi on April 11 because members of the armed resistance had gathered there and "committed terrorist acts."

Junta Deputy Information Minister Major Gen. Zaw Min Tun told the military-controlled broadcast channel MRTV that those killed in the strike were members of the anti-junta People's Defense Force, not civilians, and that the large number of casualties was the result of a rebel weapons cache exploding during the operation.

But rescue workers have disputed that account. They say the attack on the site was deliberate and thorough, beginning with a jet fighter bombing run and followed by an Mi-35 helicopter strafing the area.

Despite the international blowback, the junta again bombed Pa Zi Gyi on Thursday. Initial reports said no one was injured in the latest bombing, as most of the village's residents were either killed or still in hiding from last week's attack. But sources told RFA Burmese that many of the remaining buildings were damaged.

Speaking to RFA on Friday, residents of Pa Zi Gyi urged the international community, and more specifically, the U.N. Security Council, to take immediate action against the junta.

"There will be no civilians left in this country if effective action isn't taken," said one resident who lost eight family members in the attack. "We call for a total end to the junta's use of airstrikes against us."

"I request that the U.N. and the international community take strong action against the junta as soon as possible because ... I don't want any more people to face the tragedies we've faced," said a second resident.

Onus on the people of Myanmar

Other observers questioned whether the U.N. or other global bodies could have any impact on the situation in Myanmar were they to take a harder tack with the junta.

“If you look at the current crisis in Ukraine or any other issues that happened in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, you can see that the Security Council could never have resolved any of those issues,” said analyst Hla Kyaw Zaw. “I think that the issue of the Pa Zi Gyi village incident or any other problems in Myanmar can only be solved by the people of Myanmar.”

Ye Tun, a political analyst and former member of parliament for the Shan Nationalities Democratic Party, suggested that the international community should assume the role of mediator in Myanmar’s political crisis, with the goal of bringing a lasting peace to the country.

“The best thing is to encourage the two sides of the political spectrum to hold discussions and negotiate politically,” he said. “If countries that have influence over the junta, such as China and India, and superpowers like the U.S. that have influence over the resistance organizations ... can work cooperatively to bring the two sides together, I think a solution may be possible.”

Than Soe Naing, another analyst, agreed that the people of Myanmar cannot rely on the U.N. Security Council or other international organizations to solve their problems.

“The U.N. itself is in such an unreliable situation that it has transferred the matter to the hands of ASEAN,” he said, referring to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which Myanmar is a member.

ASEAN faced similar criticism for failing to condemn the airstrike until it finally did so in a statement issued days after the attack.

Translated by Myo Min Aung. Edited by Joshua Lipes and Matt Reed.

Correction: An earlier version of this story mistakenly referred to Ye Tun as a former member of parliament for the deposed National League for Democracy.

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