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After a year of silence, 7 political prisoners confirmed killed in Myanmar's Insein Prison

Updated April 5, 2024, 10:53 a.m. ET.

Authorities at Myanmar's notorious Insein Prison shot seven political prisoners dead under murky circumstances on Valentine's Day last year, sources with ties to the victims' families and prisoner watchdog groups told RFA Burmese on Wednesday.

The Feb. 14, 2023, killings, which were confirmed by the families on Monday after they sought international help, shed light on the fates of hundreds who have died in detention for opposing junta rule in the more than three years since the military's 2021 coup d'etat.

The seven men were arrested on Feb. 7, 2023, for allegedly killing 11 people, including veteran soldiers, local administrative officers and civilians, as part of the anti-coup movement, the junta said.

The men's names were Aung Khant Phyto (also known as Moe Tain), Pyae Phyto Nyein and Nyi Nyi Htwe - three men in their 20s - and Chit Ko, Aung Zaw Lin, Tin Soe and Aye Thein - four men in their 50s, according to relatives and groups monitoring political prisoners.

After their arrest, family members were unable to speak with the men for months and were given no update on their status, despite multiple requests to prison officials, they told RFA.

However, on Monday, they learned that within a week of their arrest and detention at Yangon's Insein Prison, the seven men were taken out of the facility to lead authorities to a "hidden cache of weapons" and shot dead "as they tried to escape," a source close to the family of one of the victims told RFA, citing a junta explanation of the incident.

"They couldn't be contacted for about a year," said the source who, like others interviewed for this report, spoke on condition of anonymity due to security concerns.

"They were confirmed to have been killed in the same month of their arrest. We only found out about their deaths on Monday."

The military regime has released no statement on the incident and attempts by RFA to contact junta Deputy Director General Naing Win went unanswered Wednesday. Officials at Insein Prison failed to provide specific answers about the circumstances surrounding the deaths when contacted by RFA.

'Murder in prison'

Tun Kyi, a former political prisoner who monitors cases of detention under the junta, told RFA that the details of the case only came to light after family members of the victims sought international assistance to verify their whereabouts.

"We have not received direct information about the killing of these prisoners, but their family members have confirmed the incident," he said.

According to former inmates who have since been released from Insein Prison, none of the seven victims were known to have been tried in court and the charges they faced were never made public.

In response to an emailed inquiry about their case, a spokesperson for the International Committee for the Red Cross, or ICRC, told RFA that the group was unable to comment.

"Our preferred way of working is to engage bilaterally and confidentially with all relevant actors to facilitate open and honest discussions, whether with the relevant authorities or with family members or a community," the spokesperson said.

"Therefore, we cannot publicly disclose or comment on the ICRC's findings, recommendations and discussions."

Aung Kyaw Moe, deputy minister of human rights for the shadow National Unity Government, said the killings amounted to "a murder in prison," and vowed to hold the junta accountable according to international law.

"This incident involved the killing of many victims, instead of just one or two," he said. "It is a grave violation of human rights."

Political imprisonment under junta

Since the 2021 coup, Thailand's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners has documented more than 25,000 political prisoners jailed by Myanmar's military regime, which it says is the largest number in the country's long history of political turmoil.

According to the Political Prisoners Network - Myanmar, 34 political prisoners died in prisons nationwide in 2023, 18 of whom were killed and 16 of whom died after being denied access to adequate medical treatment.

The International Federation for Human Rights said in February that "several hundred" political prisoners have died in junta custody due to torture, summary executions, restrictions on access to medical treatment, and harsh detention conditions.

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

Editor's note: The story has been updated to protect the source of the information included in it.

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