

Visit to UNDP ends in prison

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Among the many people in Rangoon's central jail who shouldn't be there are a couple of journalists. These two did not write or say anything against the government. They didn't do anything that constituted a threat to the army or its hold on power. Yet they were imprisoned on a charge of inciting others to "commit an offence against the state."

How this happened illustrates the difficulties faced by people in Burma wanting to improve their society without putting themselves at risk.

The story begins just after Cyclone Nargis hit the country last May. The house of 24-year-old reporter Eint Khine Oo in the outer suburbs of Rangoon was not too badly damaged. After she and her family had patched it up, she started travelling around nearby areas to see how she could help. She worked with the local Red Cross, and sent some news to her journal, Ecovision.

Around a month later she ran into 29-year-old Kyaw Kyaw Thant, another reporter and a former editor of the popular Weekly Eleven journal. He had also been looking around to see what was going on and what he could do about it. Like so many people, he brought food and money to cyclone victims. He gave the money to Red Cross personnel to pay for some medicines.

The two of them got talking. Local authorities were trying to force a group of homeless people staying at a religious hall to go back to their now nonexistent houses. The people didn't want to stay in the hall, but it was raining and they had no materials with which to make temporary shelters back where they had come from.

The reporters spoke with Red Cross country staff and agreed to go to the International Committee of the Red Cross in town, in the naive hope that they might be able to get some assistance there. But rather than going by themselves they decided it would be better if some of the people in need of the materials came too.

On June 10 a group of them set off early, along with one of the Red Cross staffers. They arrived at the office not long after it opened. They got no promises, but were told that donors would be alerted to their request.

After that, they decided they might as well go to the United Nations Development Program and try their luck there as well, with 16 women and kids from among those who had joined them at the first office. Had they known what was going to happen next, they would have gone straight home.

They arrived at the U.N. office during lunch break. The local Red Cross staffer decided to leave. The others were standing around outside when suddenly a group of plain-clothed men came upon them. One told Eint Khine Oo that he was an official. "What are you doing here?" he said. "Get in the car."

Kyaw Kyaw Thant was standing a short distance away reading the public notice board. Some came up to him. "Are you together?" one asked. "Yes," he replied innocently, and was thrust into the same vehicle. The group of mothers and children were rounded up and brought to the township police station too; they were allowed to go home after 12 days.

The police accused the two journalists of trying to make trouble by bringing the group to complain that they hadn't received help and that local government officials weren't doing their jobs. In closed court hearings, both of them strongly denied this, saying that they had merely been motivated to help cyclone victims like tens of thousands of other citizens, and they hadn't said or done anything against the government.

Even the witnesses that the prosecutor brought to argue his side of the case supported the defendants' account. One of the women who had been arrested outside the United Nations building said they had gone to ask for materials because they had been told they would have to leave the religious hall.

A government council chairman admitted that it had taken over two weeks to start documenting the extent of cyclone damage and the number of persons affected in his wards. Up until then only local people had turned up to help. And yes, they had been trying to get everyone out of religious halls because the buildings needed to be cleaned and repaired.

Judge Than Than dutifully recorded all these things and then pronounced the accused guilty. Handing down the maximum sentence of two years' imprisonment to each, she said that Kyaw Kyaw Thant had no evidence to prove that he was innocent. Apparently no one has told Judge Than Than that it is the prosecutor who has to prove the case against the defendant, not the other way around.

Eint Khine Oo and Kyaw Kyaw Thant are not the only people to have been jailed for helping out in the weeks after the cyclone, when the military regime refused offers of emergency foreign assistance. Others included renowned comedian Zarganar and human rights defender Myint Aye. But those two were speaking to the overseas media and had been involved in the monk-led protests of the year before, among many other things.

By contrast, the two journalists did everything, as they understood it, by the book. They worked quietly, talked with local Red Cross personnel - who in Burma are proxy government authorities - and went with them to the offices. They did not criticize anyone, just requested assistance for some people in need.

The problem is that in Burma "the book" doesn't exist. The rules of the game are written daily, according to circumstances. The case of Eint Khine Oo and Kyaw Kyaw Thant shows just how hard it is for people in Burma, who want to help their fellow citizens while not overstepping the mark, to know where the mark is.

Democracy activists and human rights defenders like Zarganar and Myint Aye consciously cross the line between what is permitted and what is prohibited. Other people like Eint Khine Oo and Kyaw Kyaw Thant only find out that they have become enemies of the state by accident. This knowledge comes suddenly. Its cost is measured in years behind bars. It is a cost that shouldn't have to be paid, a cost that is much too high.

P.S.

From Rule of Lords.

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