

Myanmar: Reuters journalists proved entrapped should be released immediately

(Bangkok, 25 April 2018) – Today saw another hearing in the case against Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, the two Reuters reporters who have been imprisoned since 12 December last year. A Yangon Court was asked by the lawyer of the prosecution to consider Police Captain Moe Yan Naing a hostile witness,¹ after he testified last Friday that the two detained Reuters journalists had been ‘set up’ by police the night they were arrested. In the end, the Court did not reach a verdict today, and the trial was again postponed till 2 May 2018. Previous requests for bail, dismissal of the case, and presidential pardon have all been denied. The case against the pair has raised international outrage due to unlawful procedures and questionable charges. The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) reiterates its call to the Myanmar Government to dismiss the case immediately.

Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were working on an investigative report² of the massacre of ten Rohingya Muslim men in northern Rakhine State last September. The incident has been widely recognised as an example of the humanitarian crisis that was denounced as ‘a textbook example of ethnic cleansing’ and strongly suspected as ‘acts of genocide’ by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The oppression and violence towards the Rohingya, an ethnic minority group that is denied citizenship in Myanmar, has led to more than 900,000 Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh, while some 120,000 are internally displaced. It is estimated that at least one million Rohingya people are residing abroad in countries ranging from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia.³

On 12 December 2017, the pair was arrested and charged under the country’s Official Secrets Act, which is a law dating back to 1923 and carries a maximum sentence of 14 years. Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo were accused of having ‘illegally acquired information with the intention to share it with foreign media,’ they have confirmed that they were handed the documents by policemen, but claim they were arrested before they could read them.⁴ Their arrest looks like an attempt by the Myanmar Government to create a culture of fear and suppress freedom of expression and press freedom in the country,⁵ especially related to gross human rights violations of Rohingya and other ethnic minorities.

The intimidation of journalists and attacks on press freedom in Myanmar is alarming at a time of its democratic transition. FORUM-ASIA urges the authorities of Myanmar to show its supposed

¹<https://frontiermyanmar.net/en/prosecution-calls-for-hostile-witness-status-in-reuters-case>

²<https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/myanmar-rakhine-events/>

³<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-41566561>

⁴<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-journalists-explainer/facts-on-the-arrest-of-reuters-reporters-wa-lone-and-kyaw-soe-oo-idUSKBN1EY2S4>

⁵<https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=26018>

commitment to democratic reform by immediately dropping the charges against Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, and protect those working on press freedom in the country.

About FORUM-ASIA:

FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.

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