Myanmar: Violence and Unlawful Charges against Anti-war Protesters Alarming for Myanmar’s Civic Space

(14 May 2018, Bangkok) - The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is concerned about the use of violence against the anti-war protesters in Yangon on 12 May, and urges the authorities to immediately drop all charges against the protesters, which are based on the newly amended controversial 2011 Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law.

Since early April the armed conflict in Kachin State has escalated alarmingly and has displaced at least 5,000 civilians. According to aid organisations and the Kachin Independence Army, the current clashes have been the most intense since 1960s.¹ The conflict in Kachin has triggered strong anti-war sentiment among youth leaders and local civil society organisations, who organised several marches and peaceful protests in major cities such as Myitkyina, Mandalay and Yangon, demanding safe passages for trapped civilians and an end to Kachin conflict.

Prior to the planned anti-war march in Yangon on 12 May, some 16 people related to the protests were charged under the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law. Two of the organisers, Lum Zawng and Sut Seng Htoi were convicted and fined 30,000 kyats (US$22) each. Two other activists from Pyay Region – MettaOo and Myo Thu Htut – were also charged under the same law for participating in the protests in Myitkyina. Others were harassed and kept under surveillance by Myanmar security forces, including Special Branch and the Myanmar Police. Military supporters on social media sent countless violent and threatening messages to the organisers, and others who shared information about the planned march.

On Saturday, rather than support the peaceful march and protect the protesters, the police used batons to disperse some 300 peaceful protesters who staged a sit-in and chanted anti-war slogans.² Violence also broke out between pro-military protesters and anti-war protesters.³ At least nine people were arrested on the same day, and another 17 protesters were charged under the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law, which has been criticised by civil society as being highly restrictive of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association, freedom of expression, and democracy in Myanmar.⁴

¹https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-military/thousands-call-for-aid-access-for-villagers-trapped-by-fighting-in-myanmar-idUSKBN1J11AT
⁴https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=25966
The use of such repressive laws is not unfamiliar to Myanmar, as it was widely used by the authorities to suppress political activists and dissenters during the Military regime. The fact that it is still used by the civilian-led Government is particularly alarming as the country claims to be committed to democracy and respecting the voice of the people. The use of force and violence by the police against the protesters is another sign of shrinking civic space. And it contradicts Article 39 of the 2008 Constitution that states ‘the Union shall enact necessary law (..) for flourishing of a genuine, disciplined multi-party democratic system’.\(^5\)

FORUM-ASIA condemns any use of violence and unlawful charges against the peaceful protesters and requests Myanmar Government to protect and promote fundamental freedoms in the country. FORUM-ASIA furthermore reiterates its position\(^6\) to urge the Lower House to reject the amendments to the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law in the coming parliamentary session this month.

**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.

For further information, please contact:

- East Asia and ASEAN Programme, FORUM-ASIA (asean@forum-asia.org)

---


\(^6\) [https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=25966](https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=25966)