

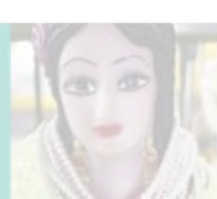


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Student demonstrators cling to a barricade during a confrontation with police at Letpadan in Bago Region yesterday. Photo: Zarni Phyo

‘Blood on your hands’: EU defends training for police force

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THE European Union last night defended itself against allegations of complicity in police brutality following a violent crackdown on students in Bago Region, saying it was not responsible for “decisions on the ground”.

It also called for a formal investigation into the violence at Letpadan, which the government says resulted in the arrest of 127 people.

The EU has been training Myanmar’s police in crowd management and riot control since 2013, reportedly following a request from opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as well as the government. The course included the provision of riot control gear.

The EU said that turning the batons on students was not part of the training.

“The fundamental purpose of the training is to increase the respect of human rights, stress the importance of negotiation and – only as a last resort – consider the use of proportional force,” the statement said.

While condemning the actions of police, the EU defended its training program. “This was needed, and as events show, this need still remains,” the statement said. “Whilst training can be given, the EU cannot make decisions on the ground.”

Anger at the EU delegation due to its Myanmar Police Force training programs began on March 6, a day after a standoff between students and police ended in violent clashes at Letpadan.

In response, activists set up camp near the EU delegation’s Yangon headquarters bearing placards condemning its cooperation with the police.

The EU responded with a statement on its Facebook page, but this only provoked further criticism in the comments section, with some posting pictures of students being attacked.

“Shame on you, EU, being fall into the trap and lies of so called reformed government in Myanmar,” said one Facebook user, Lin Zaw.

Thurein Linn wrote, “Hey EU, the blood of students and people that shed today is totally on your hands!”

More than 100 held as condemnation grows

Opposition groups and foreign governments last night condemned a violent police crackdown on protesters at Letpadan, set off when students tried to break a police blockade. **NEWS 3**



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KOKANG

UN meets govt over Kokang aid request

UNITED Nations representatives met government officials in Lashio yesterday to discuss the authorities' request for international humanitarian support for people displaced by the deadly conflict in the Kokang region of Shan State.

It is understood to be the first time the government has officially sought international assistance in the region, which has been inaccessible to most outside observers or aid providers since heavy fighting erupted on February 9. Martial law was imposed on February 17.

The move came amid reports that Chinese authorities have been pushing for refugees who fled into China to return to Myanmar.

Pierre Péron, a spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) in Myanmar, said the meeting came about after the UN and

humanitarian partners received a request from the Myanmar government "to provide humanitarian support in the Kokang Special Administrative Zone".

"UN staff have been deployed to Lashio and are liaising closely with the authorities there," he told *The Myanmar Times*.

The government had not provided details of what support it is seeking from international organisations prior to the meeting.

Mr Peron said assistance could only be required after UN staff are granted access to the region to assess the humanitarian needs.

"The UN and humanitarian partners in Myanmar are ready to support the government in assisting vulnerable civilians whose needs have been independently assessed. This will require safe and unhindered access to civilians in need," he said.

An estimated 30,000 to 60,000 people are reported to have fled from Kokang into China, while a further 13,000 have been displaced within Myanmar.

A report earlier this week in the state-run *Global New Light of Myanmar* said refugees had already started to return home from China. High-level diplomatic delegations from both countries met on March 8 and discussed the displacement camps set up in China.

It remains unclear whether refugees who have returned did so willingly.

While the government insists the situation in the regional capital Laukkai is stable, reports continue to emerge of fighting taking place in the area. State media reported yesterday that eight Tatmadaw soldiers had been killed and 51 injured in recent days during attempts to regain key positions in the region. - Fiona MacGregor

Detained businessman 'leaped to death from window': police

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AN ethnic Chinese businessman with family ties to the commander of Kokang rebels died after leaping from a window of Yangon's military hospital where he was in custody, according to an official police account released yesterday following reports that he had been tortured.

Li Guoquan, a 60-year-old former vice chair of the Myanmar Chinese Chamber of Commerce, was arrested in Yangon by the military intelligence agency on February 23 and died on the evening of March 4. His family collected his body from the hospital and he was buried the next day in Yangon's Yunnan cemetery.

According to a Yangon Region police report that was made available to *The Myanmar Times* yesterday, Mr Li "suffered depression in custody and hit his head against the wall".

Military intelligence agents took him to the military hospital in

Mingalardon township, where he received 12 stitches to his forehead. But he then jumped out of a first-floor window and died on the spot, the report said.

Hearing the news yesterday of his death, members of the business community in Yangon's Chinatown expressed their doubts over the official version. They said it also underscored their fears that the Kokang conflict - which is whipping up nationalist tensions on both sides of the border - could have dangerous repercussions for Myanmar's ethnic Chinese minority.

The businessman's death was first reported by Miandian Zaixian (Myanmar Online), a Chinese-language website which has extensively covered the month-long fighting between ethnic Kokang rebels and government forces in northern Shan State bordering China.

Mr Li was reported to be the brother-in-law of Peng Deren, military commander of the rebel Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) which is fighting to regain territory it lost to the Tatmadaw in

2009. Peng Deren is the son of Peng Jiasheng, also known by his Myanmar name of Pheung Kya-shin, the 85-year-old leader of the MNDAA.

Miandian Zaixian quoted witnesses at the hospital as saying Mr Li's body had serious injuries to the right side of his face and stomach, but that they were prohibited from taking pictures. It cited the hospital's autopsy report as saying he had died of "severe damage to internal organs" which the website claimed was due to torture.

A senior officer at the hospital, who declined to give his name, told *The Myanmar Times* he was not authorised to talk about the case. A hospital worker said he had heard of a patient recently jumping from a window but he had no details.

Mr Li, whose name in Myanmar was U Hla Win, was said to be a keen golf player and a member of various business, sports and ethnic Chinese associations in Yangon with links to Kokang and China's Yunnan province. The Myanmar Chinese Chamber of Commerce was closed yesterday and not available for comment.

Protest ends in brutal crackdown



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BATON-wielding police yesterday attacked students and monks in Letpadan and arrested almost 130 people in a violent end to an eight-day stand-off over the national education law.

The crackdown prompted widespread condemnation, with the European Union, United States and British embassies in Yangon all expressing their "concern" last night.

Witnesses said the violence started in the early afternoon when students, who had been encamped near the Aung Myay Beikman monastery, tried to break through a police blockade. Negotiations had broken down in the morning over student demands to be allowed to continue their protest march toward Yangon that had begun in Mandalay in January.

After exchanges of stone-throwing, about 500 police armed with batons attacked the more-than-100 students. *The Myanmar Times* saw Ko Min Thway Thit, student leader, beaten unconscious by about five police. Ko Aung Hmaing San was also beaten and kicked by police in front of the media. About 10 monks joining the protest were also beaten violently, their heads bleeding.

As the violence intensified, police turned to the media, cursing and shouting, "Beat! Beat! Beat them all to death," forcing about 30 reporters to run to fields near the protest camp.

Then about 300 police raided students hiding in the monastery compound, seizing Ma Phyo Phyo Aung, a student leader, by her neck. All the student leaders were believed to have been arrested in the crackdown.

The Ministry of Information reported last night that 127 people had been arrested. The report defended the use of force, saying that police had responded "according to the law" because protesters had attempted to break through police lines.

Minister for Information U Ye



Htut posted on Facebook that police had "warned the protesters repeatedly" to disperse, and only used force after they attacked police and removed barriers.

However, he conceded that police had overreacted in some cases, referring to damage inflicted on a vehicle used by the students in their demonstration. Photos of the car showed its windscreen had been smashed in.

But the 88 Generation student group said in a statement that it "strongly condemned" the actions of police and called for the immediate release of all who had been

arrested.

Embassies in Yangon also criticised the government's actions, with the United States tweeting that it was "concerned" and the "violence undermines mutual trust".

The British embassy said the crackdown and the use of "irregular security groups" to suppress other demonstrations "undermine the earlier disciplined policing of the demonstrations".

The day had begun with signs that the authorities and students would negotiate a way out of the stand-off and avoid confrontation. At about 10am, Yangon Region Hluttaw

representative Daw Nyo Nyo Thin and U Thein Lwin from the National Network for Education Reform met Bago Region Border Minister for Security and Border Affairs Colonel Thet Tun.

The initial talks failed but during a second round of negotiations an hour later both sides agreed that the students would finish the 140-kilometre (90-mile) journey to Yangon from Letpadan directly by car, instead of first marching to nearby Tharyarwady as the students had earlier proposed. That agreement broke down when the students rejected the conditions that they not



Left: A student protester cries following the confrontation between police and demonstrators. Top: An injured female student is carried by colleagues. Above: Police attack a light truck used by the demonstrators. Photos: Zarni Phyo

fly their flags or shout slogans on the way to Yangon, leading to the police assault at about 1:30pm.

The students are demanding changes to a framework national education law passed by parliament last year that they say does not give enough freedom from central control to universities and student unions or allocate sufficient resources to education.

A set of 11 demands by the students was accepted by government negotiators in February in an attempt to defuse the growing protest movement just as Yangon was also facing demonstrations by factory

workers and farmers. The students, who have received widespread popular support on the road, had insisted on continuing their march toward Yangon to keep up the pressure on parliament while it considered the proposed amendments to the education law.

Government officials have privately admitted that they made unrealistic concessions to the students last month but could not take the risk of protests growing out of control if the students were allowed to march on Yangon. - Additional reporting by Ye Mon and Wa Lone, translation by Thiri Min Htun

Rohingya clash with Bangladesh forces near Cox's Bazar

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MORE than 100 Rohingya migrants have been released from jail in Bangladesh after a high-speed chase and gunfight on March 6 left one Bangladeshi border guard wounded, sources told *The Myanmar Times*.

After a tip-off, Bangladeshi border guards stopped a convoy of over 300 Rohingya migrants from Myanmar who were travelling near Cox's Bazar on the morning of March 6, according to Reuters.

Fighting ensued and one border guard was shot. Reuters quoted an immigration official who said that 136 Rohingya migrants who had recently crossed the border were detained in the skirmish and then deported back to Myanmar.

But news agencies in Bangladesh reported that the clashes involved human traffickers and resulted in the jailing of 108 migrants pending repatriation arrangements. The UN Refugee Agency said the migrants have now been released.

"We heard from sources that the 108 individuals were not sent back to Myanmar but were released in Bangladesh once they were identified as long-term residents," said Vivian Tan, a spokesperson for the UNHCR in Bangkok.

Myanmar immigration officials claimed to know nothing of the incident, but did say that the migrants would not be allowed back to Myanmar unless they could prove their citizenship status. Many Rohingya, who are officially referred to as Bengali in Myanmar, do not hold citizenship documents.

"No one can claim they are from Myanmar if they don't have legal identity. Some illegal migrants came to Myanmar from Bangladesh," said U Khin Soe, director of the Rakhine State immigration office.

The Bangladeshi embassy in Myanmar did not respond to repeated requests for comment about the episode.

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Attorneys at Law, Thailand)
Dated. 11th March, 2015

Police beat activist, then apologise at Yangon demo

POLICE beat and detained an activist before apologising and releasing him during a demonstration in Yangon yesterday. The protest was called to condemn a violent crackdown on students at Letpadan in Bago Region.

About 100 demonstrators gathered at Sein Gay Har in Hledan at about 2:30pm, an hour after the confrontation at Letpadan, and marched down Pyay Road.

They were blocked by about 200 police near the Junction Square shopping centre. When they tried to break through the police line, officers beat and briefly detained one activist.

The scuffle quickly attracted

dozens of bystanders, who ignored police instructions to disperse.

Demonstration leaders then promised to end the protest if the police released the student and apologised to the crowd - a bargain that was quickly accepted by the officers.

"I apologise for beating the student if we have made a mistake, and I promise to release him. Please return to your homes," said a police officer, U Win Kyi.

Ko James, the husband of Ma Phyo Phyo Aung, a prominent student activist who was attacked by police at Letpadan earlier in the day, said the government's response to the demonstrations was "very stupid".

"The students don't have weapons but they attacked those [students] with weapons. The reforms are going backward. I am very disappointed," he told *The Myanmar Times*.

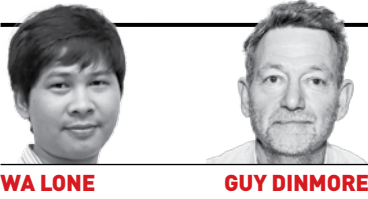
Demonstrator Ko Htoo Shwe Thike said the students could "never forgive and never forget" the government's actions.

"The government will face consequences for their mistakes. I really believe that," he said. - Ye Mon



Police release a demonstrator they briefly detained during a protest outside Junction Square yesterday. Photo: Kaung Htet

Student activists go into hiding after crackdown



DOZENS of activists from the All Burma Federation of Student Unions have gone into hiding after last week's violent crackdown on their anti-education law protests, which police followed up with raids on houses in Yangon.

Ko Aung Nay Paing, a member of the union, which is better known as Ba Ka Tha, said yesterday that police and intelligence agencies were searching for student activists in Yangon, Mandalay and other big cities.

"Nearly 50 of Ba Ka Tha leaders around the country are hiding from police," he said.

He appeared at a press conference organised in Yangon by Fortify Rights, an NGO, to launch a report highlighting how police without warrants are using powers under a law requiring all residents of Myanmar to report the identity of overnight house guests to local government officials to arrest activists.

"I feel that I am being pursued and I have to be very careful in my movements," Ko Aung Nay Paing said.

Police arrested four members of the federation's central committee in a midnight raid on a house in Yangon on March 13. The authorities warned that they intended to round up ringleaders of the student protest movement even while freeing others from prison.

The detentions followed the March 10 crackdown when phalanxes of riot police broke up a protest sit-in by students at a monastery in Letpadan – about 140 kilometres (90 miles) north of Yangon – while trying to complete a march that began in Mandalay in January to put pressure on the government to amend the education law. The authorities said 127 people were arrested, including students, local residents, monks and journalists.

Western embassies condemned the violence and called for the release of those arrested, as the crackdown threatened to erode the substantial political support extended by the US and Europe to President U Thein Sein's reformist government in the run-up to elections this November.

"There are worrying signs of backtracking, and in some areas, backtracking has gained momentum," Yanghee Lee, the UN special rapporteur on Myanmar, told reporters in Geneva on March 18. She said police surveillance and arrests under outdated defamation and national security laws had dealt a "chilling effect" to activism.

The four activists detained in Yangon were taken to Tharyarwady Prison and charged with involvement in



Activists wear bandanas with the ABFSU logo during a protest at Letpadan on March 10, shortly before a police crackdown. Photo: Zarni Phyo

the Letpadan demonstration. Students said Ko Soe Hlaing, a central committee member from upper Myanmar, was also detained although he was not involved in the march.

Ko Myat Thu, a student protest leader, said, "Police will eliminate the Ba Ka Tha organisation. This is what I have heard."

Police Major Win Sein, from Letpadan township, said police would continue to take action against the protesters depending on the results of their investigations. But he declined to give details of how the police would deal with student protesters who had escaped the crackdown, except to say that authorities would act within the law.

'Police will eliminate the Ba Ka Tha organisation. This is what I have heard.'

Ko Myat Thu
Student protest leader

Students in hiding said police and Special Branch agents had searched the houses of their parents and other relatives, tapped their phones and hacked their Facebook accounts. Police seized many mobile telephones from students during the Letpadan operation.

"Authorities have suddenly searched houses at night inspecting guest lists if they have suspicions, acting without a warrant [from a

magistrate]," Ko Myat Thu said.

House-owners were getting worried about having "guests", and the fugitive students were moving from place to place, while not daring to be seen outside, he said.

"We are working and connecting with each other in an underground way," he said.

Many were yesterday refusing to answer phone calls or had switched to new numbers.

The authorities have freed about 30 students recognised as such by the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Education. Most of the Ba Ka Tha leaders have not been recognised as students because they were involved in the 2007 "saffron" revolution, or had been previously jailed by the military junta or expelled from university. Some are now taking part in distance education, which police say does not entitle them to "student" status for the purposes of release.

The authorities have not taken action against the University Students' Union (Ta Ka Tha) whose members are currently at university. Leaders of Ta Ka Tha took part this week in discussions with the upper house of parliament over amendments to the education law, which they say puts universities and schools under excessive central government control without freedom for student unions. Ta Ka Tha members have called for the release of the Ba Ka Tha detainees, and members of both groups have denied a split.

"Even if the government created dissensions between the student unions," Ko Aung Nay Paing said, "we will fight for democracy in education together."

Call for repeal of law enabling 'midnight' arrests

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IN the early hours of March 13, three days after police rounded up student protesters in Letpadan, four members of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) were visiting the house of a friend in Yangon's Ahlone township.

According to a friend, police knocked on the front door asking to see the "guest list" for the house. After searching the house, all five present – including the reporter whose house it was – were arrested and taken to the local police station. The following day, two of the five were released. The other three remain in jail.

Under the pre-2011 military regime, authorities would search private residences under the pretence of checking for unregistered overnight guests in order to harass and detain activists. The timing of the visits has led many to refer to the practice as "midnight inspections".

The Ward or Village-Tract Administration Law was passed in 2012 to replace two laws enacted under British rule in 1907. It requires residents to inform local authorities when visitors spend the night at their homes.

In its report, *Midnight Intrusions: Ending Guest Registration and Household Inspections in Myanmar*, released yesterday, NGO Fortify Rights called on the government to stop searches of homes without a warrant and abolish requirements to register overnight guests.

"Under this law, individuals expressing their right to peaceful assembly by day may be subject to warrantless inspection by night," said Matthew Smith, the group's executive director. "As long as this law remains on the books, authorities are free to use household inspections to target dissenters and

oppress the less advantaged." Enforcement of the law had been waning under U Thein Sein's quasi-civilian government until the recent student crackdown.

The arrest of student leaders has prompted fresh calls for the provisions to be revoked.

"During the British era, the intention [of the 1907 law] was simple: to prevent independence protests. When Myanmar gained independence in 1948, those laws should have been abolished," said U Ko Ni, a prominent lawyer who attended the launch of the report.

"It doesn't matter that the inspections do not happen as often today. The important thing is that this law is still on the books," he said.

Matthew Bugher, a pro bono researcher with Fortify Rights and a global justice fellow at Harvard Law School, said the provisions violated three rights in international law, the right to privacy, the right to freedom of movement and the right to freedom of association.

"International law allows some limits to be placed on those rights, but these provisions do not even come close to meeting those standards," he said.

U Myat Ko Ko, co-founder of Yangon School of Political Science, said he had been subjected to almost a dozen midnight inspections over the years.

"It hasn't happened [to me] since about 2012, but if a political situation happens, then we are worried about it," he said. "This law should be abandoned. It is an intimidation of the citizens and affects freedom of movement. We want to have private lives in our own country and this practice means that the government is treating its own people like enemies."

While government officials were invited to the launch of the report in Yangon, none attended the event.



A Yangon resident hangs her guest registration documents on the wall of her home. Photo: Spike Johnson

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U Kaung San Hla unsuccessfully ran for parliament as an NLD candidate in Buthidaung, Rakhine State. Photo: Kayleigh Long

A man of many letters

KAYLEIGH LONG
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U KAUNG San Hla is, by his own admission, not much of a businessman. So profound is his distaste for corruption and bribery that it stood in the way of what might otherwise have been a flourishing career in logging. In 2008 he landed in Sittwe Prison for 40 days for complaining about corruption in the forestry department.

“If I was a representative in the parliament my first work would be to solve corruption and bribery,” he told *The Myanmar Times* in Sittwe last week.

However, he won’t be giving up his day job taking tourists around the temples of Mrauk-U yet, and he’ll have to continue expressing his frustration with graft the way he always has: writing many, many letters.

U Kaung San Hla, 50, joined the National League for Democracy in 1996, and ran on the party’s ticket in the November 8 elections for the state seat in northern Rakhine’s Buthidaung – arguably one of the tougher sells the party faced nationwide. He was defeated by a candidate from the Arakan National Party, which also came close to winning a majority in the state assembly. Still, he doesn’t feel it was all for nothing.

“I want to give knowledge to the local people, even during my electoral [campaign] time. I am very satisfied because I gave knowledge about freedom, rights and democracy. The people were very happy,” he said.

The exact nature of complaints his party has lodged with the election commission about dirty tricks on the campaign trail in northern Rakhine cannot be elaborated on just yet, although one reportedly involves defamation and is backed up by a recording of a rival politician’s campaign speech.

During the weeks of campaigning, U Kaung San Hla received a barrage of verbal abuse and stayed indoors at night. Some people would yell racial slurs into the church where he was staying. One man took it upon himself to ride his motorcycle up and down the street where the NLD candidate was taking lunch, loudly informing everyone that no one should attend

his funeral.

“I said to people, ‘I’m Rakhine. The ANP are also Rakhine. Why are they calling me Burmese?’”

He didn’t stick around to witness the full ballot count. “I visited the election office in the morning, then I came back [to Sittwe] at once. For the time being it is not possible [to be in Buthidaung],” he said.

U Kaung San Hla said he faced an uphill battle trying to salvage his party’s reputation of being “soft” on Rakhine State and too supportive of the local Muslim minority. Playing on their fears of being marginalised by the state’s Muslims, many villagers had been told – and believed – that the NLD was essentially a very elaborate front for a caliphate. He developed a strategy for campaigning that saw him follow in the wake of other candidates so that he could tackle any slander and allay villagers’ fears.

‘I don’t talk about religion and race because it is very easy for someone to create problems between the two communities.’

U Kaung San Hla
Unelected NLD candidate

His campaigning took him to some of the most remote areas of the country. He forded rivers to visit the Mro, Khami and Daingnet hill tribes, at one point crossing a river up to his neck.

He came across tracks of wild elephants, and visited areas where tigers were once known to occasionally attack villagers. Despite the lack of development, he said he never promised to build schools and roads, or bring rice.

“I tell people, ‘Human rights and democratic rights, federalism; then there can be development.’ Rakhine State is large and the people are few

and we have natural resources,” he said.

“I told them, ‘This is a democratic country. The sovereignty is in the hands of the people. In democratic countries, what the people desire ... no government can change that. The people’s desire is the main thing,’” he said. “Only when there is practice of law is there rule of law.”

One woman from the Daingnet minority asked him about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s marriage to Michael Aris, a “white *kalar*”, and if that wouldn’t mean Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was English – and therefore “a Muslim lady”.

U Kaung San Hla said he patiently answered similar questions time and time again.

“I asked her, ‘You are of Daingnet nationality? When I was young, if I had married a Daingnet lady, would I be Daingnet?’ She said ‘No!’ ‘And would my Daingnet wife be Rakhine nationality?’ ‘No!’ ‘Then our leader is not English,’ I said. It is very ridiculous.”

“This is not the people’s fault,” he sighed. “This is the fault of propagators. The people are simple and honest.”

Education, he said, is crucial. As a child in Sittwe, U Kaung San Hla learned the English alphabet. Unable to access books or pursue further study, he used to spend hours in the British cemetery reading from its 70 or so headstones. Early on, he admitted, he had a strange vocabulary.

“Mary: Malaria, 1835. Mr Tom Johns: died in action during the Anglo-Burmese War. ‘Although you’ve left us, we never forget.’ And so on. This was my library, my college,” he laughed.

With education in Rakhine State falling desperately short, he sees this as a key issue to be addressed once a democratic system is entrenched. So too is the matter of communal tensions. The NLD’s silence on the matter has been a calculated choice.

“I don’t talk about religion and race because it is very easy for someone to create problems between the two communities,” he said. “In my point of view, a politician and the citizens should keep quiet because we are trying to change our country into a democratic nation. We don’t need any problems between the communities. We must be clever, I think. Religion is religion, politics is politics.”

Jailed students facing health problems, say relatives

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STUDENTS who have spent the past eight months in prison following a brutal police crackdown are suffering from a range of diseases, including tuberculosis, relatives say.

The students, who are being held without bail during their trial, receive little or no medical attention and many are still in pain from the beatings administered by police.

Most were arrested at Letpadan, Bago Region, in March, when the government ordered police to break up a peaceful march on Yangon in protest against the National Education Law.

Police beat and arrested students, monks and journalists accompanying the march, despite an earlier government promise not to arrest the protesters.

U Thet Min, chair of the United Nationalities of Democratic Organisation (UNDO), said he was able to examine the students when they appeared at Tharyarwady District Court at a recent hearing.

“Some have suffered vomiting blood, tuberculosis and skin diseases,” he said.

He added that many student prisoners still suffered pains in the stomach, head or limbs from being beaten and kicked by the police.

He said most did not receive regular treatment, and the prison environment was very unhealthy.

Ko Min Min Zaw, who is detained in Tharyarwady Prison, contracted military tuberculosis, according to X-rays taken in the district hospital, but still receives no treatment, said U Thet Min.

U Tun Tun Oo, father of Ma

Honey Oo, a student activist in the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, said his daughter had received no treatment in the prison hospital despite suffering a skin condition.

U Nay Win, the father of student leader Ma Phyo Phyo Aung, said he was concerned about the students’ exposure to contagious diseases such as TB, and the lack of medical care. “They really need proper treatment in prison,” he said.

‘Some have suffered vomiting blood, tuberculosis and skin diseases.’

U Thet Min
United Nationalities Democratic Organisation

Contacted by *The Myanmar Times*, officials at Tharyarwady Prison said there was no one authorised to speak to the media.

A report issued in September by the Myanmar National Human Rights Commission recommended that prison hospitals should have enough medical staff, medications and equipment to deal with inmates’ health problems.

A source with the International Committee of the Red Cross said the government was not transparent about conditions in the prison system.

Under its agreement with the government to conduct prison visits, the ICRC is forbidden to disclose information about conditions.

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Love, politics and separation

Ma Phyo Phyo Aung has been one of the more visible faces of the student movement – but her activism has come at high personal cost

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ON the evening of March 9, Ma Phyo Phyo Aung made a phone call from Letpadan. It was clear in her voice that she believed trouble was brewing.

"I don't know what will happen tomorrow, but I am so worried for my students," she said in a small voice. Her usually determined speech seemed clouded with worry.

The next day, however, Ma Phyo Phyo Aung showed little anxiety as she took charge of negotiations with the police, who had surrounded the student protesters just outside a monastery.

When it became clear that no compromise could be reached, tensions rose quickly. The young general secretary of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions looked increasingly worried as students launched a futile attempt to break through police barricades.

When the order was finally given to forcefully end the protest, Ma Phyo Phyo Aung ran with her colleagues from the raised batons of the officers. The students had no means to defend themselves against the frenzied attack, and many were severely beaten.

Initially Ma Phyo Phyo Aung managed to get away, fleeing to a nearby monastery with about 80 activists and Letpadan residents. Realising they were surrounded with nowhere to go, however, they decided to surrender. One by one they walked outside and were arrested.

On March 25, the township court in Letpadan – a small town in Bago Region, about 145 kilometres (90 miles) north of Yangon – charged her and 79 other activists under five sections of the penal code. If convicted she could face up to nine-and-a-half years in prison.

It is not an unfamiliar prospect for Ma Phyo Phyo Aung, who spent more than four years in prison for her involvement in protests in 2007 dubbed the Saffron Revolution. Freed in 2012, she was, like many former political prisoners, barred from returning to university, but continued to be involved in politics. She joined other students and activists in calling for changes to the recently enacted National Education Law in November 2014, during US President Barack Obama's visit.

Politics is a family pursuit. Her father, U Nay Win, has done two stints behind bars. On the day of the crackdown, he went to work as usual, as he could not afford to take the day off.

"I didn't go [to Letpadan] because I didn't think they would crack down like this," he said.

Some student who were imprisoned with Ma Phyo Phyo Aung but later released said the guards had gossiped that she was rich and famous –



Ma Phyo Phyo Aung, general secretary of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, speaks on the phone from Letpadan. Photo: Aung Khant

"like an actress," her father says.

He relates this anecdote from his small, mosquito-infested wooden house on the fringes of Yangon, which stands as evidence to the contrary. This "fame" seems to stem from the many friends abroad that she made during a trip to the George W Bush Centre in Washington last year. Some of these – including George W Bush himself – are now pressuring the government to release her.

It has shown no sign of relenting, and Ma Phyo Phyo Aung's parents worry about how she will survive a second stint behind bars.

"Burmese prisons are the worst in the world. Prisoners here are lower than animals," U Nay Win says.

He knows what he is talking about. When Ma Phyo Phyo Aung was just 10 months old, U Nay Win was sentenced to nine years in prison for political activities. The sentence was later extended to 14 years after he was accused of continuing his political activities in prison. It was a difficult time for the young father, who missed the chance to see his only daughter grow up.

Three months after U Nay Win's arrest, his wife, Daw Thandar, brought Ma Phyo Phyo Aung to see him in prison. The little girl, then just over a year old, did not recognise him.

"I did not say anything to her because I thought that if she recognised me, she would cry. I did not want to do that to her," U Nay Win said.

Years of suffering followed. U Nay Win says he was tortured and deprived regular visits from his family. Once he was not allowed visitors for 18 months. Later, when he was trans-

'I don't know what will happen tomorrow, but I am so worried for my students.'

U Nay Win

Father of Ma Phyo Phyo Aung

ferred to Myitkyina Prison in the country's far north, his wife could not afford to visit him, as she spent most of her income looking after sick relatives and raising Ma Phyo Phyo Aung.

Despite the lack of contact, Ma Phyo Phyo Aung has a close relationship with her father, Daw Thandar says. "I taught her to respect her father," she

told *The Myanmar Times*. "We always talked about him."

It was this respect that in part led to Ma Phyo Phyo Aung's first period in jail. When Cyclone Nargis devastated parts of the Ayeyarwady delta in May 2008, U Nay Win asked his daughter to help him collect and bury the bodies of the dead, which had been left to rot by the military authorities. Both were in hiding at the time, wanted by the authorities for their involvement in the 2007 protests.

The safe option would have been to keep their heads down. However, they felt unable to stand by when such a large part of the country was suffering and decided to travel to the delta.

Both were arrested and shortly separated again: her father sent to Hpa-an Prison in Kayin State, while Ma Phyo Phyo Aung spent her early 20s in Mawlamyine Prison in Mon State.

Before she was arrested in the delta, Ma Phyo Phyo Aung had fallen in love with Ko Lin Htet Naing, a fellow student activist.

They eventually married in December 2014. It was politics that brought them together. It has now separated them again, just months after their wedding.

Ko Lin Htet Naing is now in hiding, wanted by the government for his alleged involvement in student protests in Yangon.

He has anxiously followed the trial following her arrest at Letpadan. On March 25, the morning of Ma Phyo Phyo Aung's second court appearance, Ko Lin Htet Naing received a phone call that has made his confined existence slightly more bearable. It was his wife calling from outside the courthouse.

"I am too, too happy," he later wrote on his Facebook page.

Later in the day, however, Ma Phyo Phyo Aung and the other students were charged with holding an unlawful assembly, continuing the assembly after being told to disperse, rioting, hurting or disturbing a public servant and disturbing public tranquility. Photos of Ma Phyo Phyo Aung handcuffed to her friend Honey Oo were circulated on social media together with messages calling for their release.

Her parents say they are not optimistic that the charges will be dropped.

"I think they won't be released – they'll be sentenced," said her father. "The government sees the students as the enemy."

Fugitive student activist transferred to prison

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A student union activist arrested last week was taken to Tharyarwady Prison yesterday after being charged in Letpadan court on five counts related to his role in student protests against the National Education Law.

Ko Nanda Sitt Aung would also be charged as a fugitive under section 512 of the penal code, police Lieutenant Colonel Aye Thein of the Tharyarwady district told *The Myanmar Times* ahead of the court hearing.

The 35-year-old was one of four

activists in hiding charged in absentia after the Letpadan protest on March 10. A total of 66 students and activists have been detained in Tharyarwady Prison following the March 10 police crackdown which ended attempts to march from Mandalay to Yangon in protest against the National Education Law passed last year.

Ko Nanda Sitt Aung was arrested on March 27 in Lanmadaw township after he took part in another student protest in central Yangon. The activist faces charges of unlawful protest for each of the townships participating in the student-led rallies.

Yangon Police yesterday transferred him to Letpadan township where he was previously listed as one of four fugitive activists wanted for arrest. The remaining three are still in hiding.

U Htay, father of Ko Nanda Sitt Aung, said he had met several times with his son in police custody. His son told him that he did not know how many charges he might face in the courts for taking part in the rally that went through many townships and jurisdictions.

His son had been scheduled to appear before Kamaryut court yesterday,

where U Htay and others had waited in vain to see him, but the hearing was cancelled while he was transferred to Letpadan.

"I am so disappointed with the action of the police. They didn't give any exact information to me as a parent. I really didn't know what was happening to my son," U Htay told reporters.

Ko Zay Ye Lwin, president of the student union at Yangon Economic University, said they had called for the immediate release of student protesters from prison during public hearings of the bill committee of the Amyotha

Hluttaw, or upper house, earlier this month.

"We told the parliament about this but they said it directly concerned the government so they could not do it [release the students]. The government didn't keep its promise, as we had agreed, not to take actions against the student protesters," he said.

U Htay told the Media in front of the Kamaryut court after long waiting his son "I am so disappointed to the police action, they didn't give any exact information to me as a parents, I really didn't know what my son has been going on"