

Irrawaddy: Lawlessness and disorder in Burma

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A man in Rangoon quarreled with his wife. Local authorities arrived and took the man into custody. The following morning, he was dead.

This may sound hard to believe, but it happened last Sunday in Rangoon's North Okkalapa Township.

Naing Oo was arrested by authorities -including members of the Union Solidarity and Development Association-last Sunday after the 36-year-old manual laborer argued with his wife in their home on the outskirts of the former capital.

The next morning, Naing Oo's body was discovered by his brother, Min San, in a Ward Peace and Development Council office. His body and face had sustained serious injuries. In answer to Min San's question about what had happened, the authorities answered: "He died of a cold."

The bloody wounds notwithstanding, Min San had seen no sign of illness in his brother the previous day. But further inquiry was impossible. The rest of Naing Oo's family was barred from seeing the body, and the USDA quickly arranged for its cremation.

And the story ends here, after a man is murdered in custody and his family are denied both an investigation and a trial.

Burma's ruling junta is notorious enough for its brutal behavior since 1988, when government soldiers gunned down thousands of pro-democracy protesters on the streets of Rangoon. Since that time, Burmese have lived in terror of the country's military intelligence apparatus, which operates outside the law and can detain, interrogate, torture and imprison anyone it chooses for any reason it chooses-particularly those suspected of anti-government activities.

The fear of Burma's internal intelligence agency eased somewhat after the ouster of former Prime Minister and military intelligence chief Gen Khin Nyunt. But that fear is returning with the rise of government-backed civilian organizations.

In recent years, the ruling junta has empowered local authorities and civilian groups, such as Ward or Township Peace and Development Councils, the USDA, the paramilitary group Pyithu Sawn Arr Shin and the Auxiliary Fire Brigade. Members of the USDA and Pyithu Swan Arr Shin are believed to have been involved in the attack on Suu Kyi and her entourage four years ago in Depayin in Upper Burma.

Such groups operate with impunity, which suggests that they have been empowered by the government to do the dirty work of the military regime.

Naing Oo's death illustrates the absence of the rule of law and a legitimate justice system in Burma. His fate haunts many in the country, who fear that their security-and their very lives-are always at stake, whether they commit a crime or not.

Unfortunately, Naing Oo's story is not unique. In March 2006, 40-year-old Thet Naing Oo was handcuffed and beaten to death in Rangoon after quarreling with local authorities, including members of the Auxiliary Fire Brigade.

Less than a year earlier, human rights activist Aung Hlaing Win, a member of the National League for Democracy, died in custody during interrogation by authorities. Neither case was investigated. No one was held responsible for the murders.

Such incidents by government-backed organizations suggest that their operational goals include spreading lawlessness and fear among Burmese, especially political activists.

The attack on Suu Kyi in 2003 -in which dozens of her supporters were killed- shows that no one is beyond their reach.

And for all the junta's talk about a modern, developed and discipline-flourishing democracy, the people of Rangoon know they live their lives at the whim and fancy of government-sponsored thugs.

P.S.

* From Burmanet:

<http://www.burmanet.org/news/2007/03/23/irrawaddy-lawlessness-and-disorder-in-burma-kyaw-zwa-moe/#more-7169>