

Features

Bo Thanmani, Resistance Group Founder Killed by Myanmar Junta Troops Died a Hero, Comrades Say

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Bo Thanmani, an unsung hero of Myanmar's Spring Revolution.

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It was well past midnight, but resistance fighters in Shwebo, Upper Myanmar, were desperately searching for the corpses of their leader and two colleagues who were killed in action in fighting with junta troops.

After wading through a number of paddy fields with the help of torches, they finally found the bodies of the three resistance fighters, said Ko Kywe, spokesman of Battalion 23 of the Shwebo Defense Force (SBDF).

"As we don't have guns, we could only search for their bodies with the help of an ally after the fighting. We retrieved the bodies around 1 a.m. and buried them around 2.30 a.m.," Ko Kywe told The Irrawaddy.

The three fighters were killed when members of the SBDF clashed with junta troops of Division 33 near the village of Chaung Mee To in the northeast of Wetlet Township in Shwebo District on June 9.



Bo Thanmani

Their leader, SBDF founder Bo Thanmani, was among the casualties, killed while covering his comrades with his old rifle until the last bullet, said Ko Kywe.

It is the biggest loss the SBDF has suffered so far.

A line of revolutionaries

Neither short nor tall, Bo Thanmani was a mustachioed, bearded man with thick eyebrows. At first glance, he resembled Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The ethnic Rakhine, or Arakanese, man was born in Rakhine State on March 4, 1973. Born Kyaw Mya Than, he was known as Maung Maung by relatives and friends, and assumed the nom de guerre “Bo Thanmani” after establishing the SBDF.

His father was U Kyaw Mya—aka Yebaw (comrade) Kyaw Mya—a leader of the Communist Party of Arakan (CPA) and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB).



U Kyaw Mya and his son Bo Thanmani

Yebaw Kyaw Mya served as the secretary of the CPB in Rakhine State around 1977. He was a Rakhine revolutionary leader who fought the Japanese during their occupation of Myanmar during World War II.

“After he became a member of the CPB Politburo, U Kyaw Mya came via Bangladesh and China to Panghsang [today the headquarters of the United Wa State Army in Shan State], where the CPB was based. He brought along his wife, his four daughters and the youngest child, their son Maung Maung. I think Maung Maung was just 5 or 6 at the time,” said a political observer who served in the CPB.

Ko Maung Maung underwent communications training with the CPB. After the group collapsed in 1989, he lived in Kunming in China’s Yunnan Province and in the Chinese border town of Ruili, said the observer.

“He ran a shop in Jiegao [a border trade zone in China near the border with Myanmar]. He got married and had children. But I don’t know how he got into Shwebo after the Spring Revolution broke in Myanmar,” he said.

Resistance group established

After the Myanmar military seized power from the country’s democratically elected government in

February last year, Ko Maung Maung joined the street protests against the coup in a town in central Myanmar, like many others throughout the country.



U Kyaw Mya

After many protesters were killed and injured in the regime's brutal crackdown, Ko Maung Maung felt the call of duty and went to Shwebo to do his fair share. There he met a group of young people who were attacking junta targets in towns as urban guerrilla fighters.

But he did not return to his home after the training, said Ko Kywe. "We were an underground guerrilla group; mostly, we carried out explosions in towns. That's when we met him," said Ko Kywe.

Ko Maung Maung then established the SBDF, shaping it as a military organization and contacting the National Unity Government.

The group started its armed revolt with only one MA-1 assault rifle and homemade guns, and still doesn't have enough arms and ammunition to this day, said SBDF members.

Last battle

Bo Thanmani left for Chaung Mee To Village around 6.30 p.m. on June 9 with 15 resistance fighters to attack junta soldiers who arrived near the village, said Ko Kywe.

"He saw a vehicle outside the village. He asked one of the junta soldiers [who were not wearing uniforms] for our secret code. The soldier could not answer, and Bo Thanmani opened fire on him. It was followed by an exchange of fire," he said.

The junta soldier was shot dead by Bo Thanmani, according to witnesses. But, more than two dozen junta soldiers opened fire on Bo Thanmani and his troops with automatic rifles. Bo Thanmani and a resistance fighter were injured.

"Bo Thanmani was hit in the thigh, and Ko Soe Paing covered him with a SIG handgun. Then the two covered the others and told them to retreat. We only have homemade guns. When it comes to automatic assault rifles, we only had one MA-1 rifle used by Bo Thanmani since the beginning of the revolution. Even that gun wasn't new," said Ko Kywe.

The duo might have been captured alive before being killed by junta soldiers, said SBDF members.

"It appears that they were arrested after they ran out of bullets. Their hands were tied behind their backs. Bo Thanmani was shot twice, once in the heart and again in the head," said Ko Kywe.

A leader dedicated to his followers

Bo Thanmani was a decisive leader and always finished what he started, SBDF members said.

“He fought bravely, and he would always finish any job he started. He demanded the same from us,” said Ko Kywe.

Bo Thanmani was tolerant and provided moral guidance, said SBDF members. “He was very tolerant of his subordinates,” agreed Ko Kywe.



The bodies of Bo Thanmani and two SBDF fighters

“I am serving as the leader because I have taken the leading role, but we are brothers in this revolution and you are my younger brothers,” Bo Thanmani was quoted as frequently telling his subordinates.

Bo Thanmani also offered financial help to the families of fallen resistance fighters from his group. He planned to establish a trading company after the revolution, which he wanted to run with his colleagues, sharing the profits.

“He wanted to establish a company which we would run together and whose profits we would share. He had even named the company—the Faith of Spring. He believed he and all the other comrades would still be alive after the revolution,” said Ko Kywe.

He sacrificed his life fighting the Spring Revolution against the military regime, dying at the age of 49.

“Both his father and mother were leaders of the Communist Party of Arakan. He himself was born in Rakhine. But he died a PDF leader in Shwebo. Though he was an ethnic Rakhine man, he was not driven by Rakhine nationalism. He was driven by class. He took the position that he would stand by the oppressed people regardless of their race. That’s why he became a PDF leader in Shwebo,” said a friend of Bo Thanmani.

SBDF members said they would continue their resistance despite the tremendous loss the group has suffered.

“It appears that we have to restart from square one. But we have his friends among the revolutionary groups. We have sought help from them. We won’t give up because of his death. We will move forward and fight bravely. But we have needs that need addressing,” said Ko Kywe.

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