



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Karen activists facing charges for holding an event to commemorate the 69th Karen Martyr's Day

Naw Ohn Hla – the co-founder of the Democracy and Peace Women Network (DPWN) and a prominent human rights and land rights activist – and two other activists were recently charged under section 20 of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law for holding an event to commemorate the 69th Karen Martyr's Day in Yangon. Around 100 people participated in the peaceful commemoration which took place on August 12th in Maha Bandula Park.

KHRG strongly condemns the instrumentalisation of restrictive laws to curtail the right to freedom of expression and assembly of ethnic minority activists, and prevent them from holding events to celebrate their culture and history. This illustrates the process of “Burmanisation”, in which the Myanmar government uses laws, violence and economic measures to oppress ethnic minorities.

The Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law only requires organisers of public events to notify the authorities at least 48 hours in advance. In this case, the Yangon government was informed one month ahead of the event, but organisers reported that the local authorities did not allow them to hold the commemoration under the name of “Karen Martyr's Day” and arbitrarily decided to deny them permission to hold this event, in breach of the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law. Authorities often misuse this notification requirement to arbitrarily deny permission, in violation with international standards for the protection of freedom of assembly and expression.

Based on the charges, Naw Ohn Hla and the other two Karen activists now face up to one month in jail. Judicial harassment against ethnic minority activists and human rights defenders has been a prevailing feature of the Myanmar's government efforts to restrict civil society space in the country. This has a significant chilling effect on other human rights defenders and organisations.

The charges launched against Naw Ohn Hla violate her inherent rights to freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of religion or belief.

KHRG urges the Myanmar government to drop all charges against Naw Ohn Hla and others who face similar charges for organising the August 12th commemoration. The Myanmar government should also amend the Peaceful Assembly and Peaceful Procession Law to ensure that its provisions comply with international human rights standards.

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