

Interview: 225-HRV: Detention, Opinion, Torture, Slavery, Forced Labour

[U Nga Reh, General Secretary of the Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy (KNLD), who was subjected to arrest by SLORC before 1990 general elections. On 18 July 1995, he revealed to ABSDF the life of political prisoners in Burma in this own words.]

Source: ABSDF

I would like to divide my story into two parts: the first concerns the movement of our party in Kayah State and the second is about my experiences in Myingyan and Mandalay prisons.

We formed our party, Kayah State All Nationalities League for Democracy (KNLD) on 28 October 1988. The party's aims and objectives were to promote unity among ethnic minorities in Burma, democracy, human rights and ethnic rights. We launched election campaigns in six different cities — Loikaw, Demoso, Pruso, Bawlake, Pasawng and Shadaw — in Kayah State. Our chairman was U Sao Nwe Thaung who was arrested on 18 August 1989, just two months before I was arrested. We were told that we were arrested because we made anti-Tatmadaw speeches during our election campaigns and we talked about forced portering and forced labour. We believe that there was one more reason: SLORC wanted to remove all parties, which could rival SLORC-backed National Unity Party (NUP), from being legal-fold.

Although SLORC arrested the top leaders of our party, we still managed to win two seats in the 1990 General Elections. U Khin Maung Cho from constituency-1 and U Victor Leh from constituency-2 of Demoso Township were successful. U Khin Maung Cho, an executive member of the KNLD, also became a representative in the National Convention. He was later expelled from the convention because of his harsh criticism on the military government. Finally, without any explanation SLORC abolished our party on 3 March 1992.

I would now like to talk about our arrest in 1989. As I said, U Sao Ngwe Thaung, our chairman, was arrested on 18 August 1989. Later, our secretary-1 U Zaw Myint and I myself were arrested on 15 September and 26 October respectively. Three of us were locked together in Loikaw prison before being sent to Myingyan prison. U Zaw Myint and I were sentenced to five years' imprisonment and U Sao Ngwe Thaung was sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. We were then moved to Myingyan prison on 13 December 1989. One year and a half later, some 40 political prisoners were split into others prisons in Mandalay and Meiktila due to their clandestine political activities in prison. U Zaw Myint's prison term was increased one more year for this reason. U Sao Ngwe Thaung and I were sent to Mandalay prison in June 1991 and U Zaw Myint to Meiktila.

In Myingyan Prison:

As I said we three were locked together in Loikaw for about three months. U Sao Ngwe Thaung was called to Eastern Command Headquarters in Taunggyi and interrogated for two months. We were treated the same as other criminals in Loikaw. These criminals and ourselves were moved to Myingyan on 13 December 1989. We had to sleep in Meiktila over night before we reached Myingyan. The prison officials did not allow us to sleep without chains on that night.

On the 14th, we were at the gate of Myingyan prison where we were checked for three hours. Our belongings were seized and we were given one thin blanket and three white prison uniforms. We three were kept locked in chains even in this small prison cell which was about 8ft x12ft. We had to use this one thin blanket as a bed on the concrete floor. We had to eat and sleep in this concrete room which was also our toilet. Actually, we did not have a toilet, just a small pot which we used as a chamber pot. Our request to have drinking water inside the cell was ruthlessly rejected. There was only a one square foot window on the iron door through which we could get fresh air.

At the beginning, we were allowed to be freed for a morning and afternoon for walk. However, everything had to do with money. We had to bribe the wardens with 20 Ks and above for each and every request to do this and that. From 6:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon and from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. was the time we could walk outside. We occasionally made discussion with other political prisoners. Unfortunately, everything was changed, after the NLD and CPB (Communist Party of Burma) members in prison held discussions. All freedom was deprived. We were told by the wardens that it was because the discussion (the wardens called it "fighting") was very noisy. After that there was no permission to communicate with other prisoners during our walk. At night, we were not allowed to use a light, and no talking or whispering was allowed. We never succeeded to persuade the wardens to let us read even a piece of paper in the cell. It was a crime if you were found with a smuggled piece of paper or prohibited materials. Even worse, we were not allowed to use mosquito repellent. As you know, Myingyan has very hot weather and a lot of mosquito.

One thing I saw the first time in my life. Monks were punished by laymen. Do you know, we witnessed prison officers forced five monks to disrobe and wear white prison uniforms like other prisoners. Of course, those monks had been arrested and sentenced to five years' imprisonment like us under allegation that they had participated in politics. All prisoners, including the monks were controlled by other prisoners, the in charge persons who were appointed by the wardens. They were all criminals. They were like gangsters and asked us for money for many reasons. Sometime, they were much worse than the wardens. They would beat us for no reason. Every time they came to check us (I do not know what they were checking for) we had to sit in "standard squat" until they completed their checking. If they were not satisfied with the way we sat, we were subjected to beatings. We were not

allowed to see their faces while we were sitting (squatting). If we did not follow, there would be beatings again. All from appointed in charge persons to the top prison officers, used to come frequently to "checking" and demand money.

Mandalay Prison

When I heard that we were going to be moved to Mandalay prison, I thought Mandalay would be a little bit better than the present prison. Actually, Mandalay was worse. We found ourselves at the gate of Mandalay prison on 30 April 1994, sitting (squatting) in front of prison officers and wardens. They forced us to cover our heads with black cloth, they then searched our bodies. We were also beaten but never understood why. U Sao Ngwe Thaung was beaten the worst because he shouted at the wardens not to beat the prisoners. We were herded into small cells. It was a shock to find myself alone in a very small cell after all. One month later, I got to know that everybody had been put in solitary confinement like me. We all were locked in chains even during our time in solitary confinement. We only got one bamboo mat for sleeping and a dirty chamber pot. Nobody got drinking water, only very thin boiled rice which was like "salty glue". Many times I had to pretend to eat this glue because I did not want to be beaten.

After one month in solitary confinement, we, three persons, were put in a small cell again. It was not different from the last month except that we could talk each other. We were not allowed to receive any visitors for six months. Ten of us who were moved from Myingyan were not allowed to see any relatives for one year. After that, we were moved to the cells where all the political prisoners were locked. The cells were as small as the last one but had more people this time. I was squeezed into this small cell with four other persons until we ended our jail term. I saw other prisoners whose jail term were already over but they had to bribe 3,000-5,000 Ks to the wardens and officers for their release. Many prisoners whose sentences of less than 10 years' imprisonment were forced to go to labour camps which were the recruiting centre for forced labourers and porters or mine-sweepers. If you could bribe thousands of kyats, you could be spared from this. Can you imagine, how a prisoner can earn that much money?

In terms of the food we got in prison, our daily food was only boiled rice and vegetables which were not edible. Almost everybody got diarrhoea. We got meat once a week. But, after the deduction by the wardens, we got just one third of the total, 33g per person.

I was released on 27 December 1993 but nobody appeared to pay the bail. Therefore, I had to wait for two more weeks at No. 5 Police Station in Mandalay. I saw about 300 prisoners there. It was a hell. Five or more people died everyday from malnutrition and diseases. Throughout my days in prisons, we never saw any attempt by the prisons to take responsibility to provide medical care for ailing prisoners. 1 January 1994 was my last day in that hell. I wished all the best for U Sao Ngwe Thaung and U Zaw Myint, including all other political prisoners in the whole

Burma. I was sure there were far worse experiences of other political prisoners in prisons such as Insein, Ye Kyi-I. U Sao Ngwe Thaung was released at the end of April 1995 and U Zaw Myint was on 10 January 1995.

I want the world to know about the suffering of the political prisoners in Burma's prisons under SLORC. There was no human rights at all. We were treated like animals. I was released but there are thousands of political prisoners still suffering each day in Burma's prisons.

Interview: 226-HRV: Slavery, Forced Labour

Name: Tin Myint
 Age: 35
 Sex: Male
 Family: Married to Ma Htwe
 Occupation: Worker at a restaurant
 Address: Moulmein
 Source: ABSDF

[Tin Myint who managed to escape from the hands of SLORC troops was a prisoner before he was forced to serve as a porter. He revealed his story to a student reporter of the ABSDF.]

I was arrested with the charge of smuggling marijuana at my house in eastern Mergui. I was sentenced to four years' imprisonment in 1991. I was first put in Moulmein prison and in December 1994 I was sent to Zingyaik quarry, where all prisoners were assigned for manual-stone-crushing. When my prison term was almost to be expired, I was collected from there to serve as a porter. I was with other prisoners who were handed over to LID 33. We reached Manerplaw at the end of December 1994. Some troops from Manerplaw including LID 33 went back to Papun on 2 February 1995 because of shortage of food supplies. Other porters and I were ordered to carry loads of the soldiers on their way back to Papun. I witnessed field commanders sending incorrect reports back to their headquarters at Tactical Operations Command. For instance, at Dawn Gwin, one field commander reported back to the headquarters of the Tactical Operations Command that they captured four assault rifles from U Pwe Hta and 20th Battalion of KNU. The reality was that they had not even reached the place called U Pwe Hta which is about 20 km up-stream of Dawn Gwin. Actually, these rifles were seized when the soldiers and DKBA shot a boat of ABSDF on 28 January.

Interview: 227-HRV: Livelihood, Women, Slavery, Forced Labour

Name: Than Soe
Age: 21
Sex: Male
Family: Married to Ma Htwe
Occupation: Farmer
Address: Bilin, Mon State
Source: ABSDF

[Than Soe who managed to escape from the hands of SLORC troops was a prisoner before he was forced to serve as a porter. He revealed his story to a student reporter of the ABSDF.]

I was put in Moulmein prison with the charge of illegal timber trading. In December 1994, I was ordered to serve as a porter together with other 150 prisoners, including Tin Myint. I saw some women porters when I was sent to Manerplaw at the end of December 1994. I also saw about 10 monks who were holding rifles while we were moving towards Manerplaw. I believed that those monks were Karen Buddhists. Tin Myint and I were ordered to carry a wounded soldier who was shot by ABSDF. On 10 February 1995, we managed to escape after we were ordered to catch a chicken in the bushes. We were rescued by the students after we crossed Salween River by using a bamboo raft at about 5:30 a.m. on 12 February. More prisoners from several different prisons were collected to serve as porters. Some of them were told that they would have reduction on their prison terms if they went to front-lines as porters. It was unbearable to see that many women were forced to serve as porters. The soldiers violently ordered them to carry such over-loaded food supplies. If a woman could not manage to move with the load, she was subjected to beatings with rifle butt or bamboo stick.

Interview: 228-HRV: Livelihood, Detention, Women, Slavery

Name: Kyaw Moe
Age: 17
Sex: Male
Ethnicity: Burman
Religion: Buddhist
Parents: U Tin Aye & Daw Pu Yin
Family: Married to Ma Htwe
Occupation: Farmer
Address: Grit Kote Village, Paukkaung Township, Pegu Division
Source: ABSDF

I was arrested by LID 66 on my way back from a video show (In Burma, most people cannot afford to buy a video player on their own — people have invented

video shows as a source of income). Ten people from my village were arrested together with me and were sent to LIB 116 under the command of LID 33. We saw about 200 porters, including 15 women, when we started moving from Thaton. We then reached Papun and were ordered to carry food supplies and ammunitions. The 15 women were left in Papun without any explanation. The male porters guessed that the women may have been forced to stay at the military headquarters for entertainment of SLORC or for other forms of forced labour. I was abandoned on the way because I had got severe diarrhoea and was unable to move anymore. I was taken care by some KNU troops who met me one day later at the place where I had been left.

Interview: 229-HRV: Slavery

Name: Min Tin Soe
 Age: 21
 Sex: Male
 Ethnicity: Burmese Muslim
 Religion: Islam
 Parents: U Htun Lwin & Daw Khin Than Myint
 Family: Married to Ma Hla Hla Win with one child
 Occupation: Painter
 Address: Tin Hlaing Quarter, Thaton, Mon State
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested on my way back home from my wife's betel stall, at the entrance of Shwe Sar Yan Pagoda in Thaton. I managed to escape to the other side of Salween (on the Thai side) River after I reached a camp upriver of Salween near Dawn Gwin. I was found by some KNU troops.

Interview: 230-HRV: Slavery, Women, Child

Name: Tin Hlaing
 Age: 15
 Sex: Male
 Parents: U Tin Hla (a) Kasin, Daw Ma San Myint
 Occupation: Street vendor
 Address: Nga Dai Zegyi Quarter, Moulmein, Mon State
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested while waiting for a train from Thaton to Moulmein at Thaton Railway Station. I was sent with other porters from Thaton to Papun. I saw about 40 women in another truck. We were forced to carry ammunition. We encountered fighting five times before reaching the Salween. We managed to escape to the other side of Salween and we reached there on the same day. I was found by some KNU troops.

Interview: 231-HRV: Livelihood, Slavery, Livelihood, Torture, Execution

Name: Zaw Lwin
Age: 19
Sex: Male
Parents: U San Tin and Daw Kyi Kyi
Family: Married to Malar with two sons
Occupation: Street vendor
Address: Bote Ta Lote village, Thazi Township, Mandalay Division
Source: ABSDF

I was a friend of Soe Hlaing, Aung Aung and Myo Naing from Bote Ta Lote village in Thazi Township. These three friends were very much attached to my wife and sons. My parents also loved my friends as their own sons. I always regarded 30-year-old Myo Naing as an eldest brother among three of them. Myo Naing always taught us right from wrong. We really had the memories to share in their simple lives as farmers. We planned to visit my aunt in Kwe Pwe village, Taungoo Township in Pegu Division, after the harvest. Although our plan came true, our fate turned to the bad side since we were arrested by IB 234 on our way back home. Our lives as porters were much more difficult than we had been as farmers. We were forced to carry one thousand rounds of G3- G4 rifles. We were severely beaten if our movements slowed down because of exhaustion. We were very pained to see that the soldiers abandoned porters, who were simply left without food, without medicine and without security. I later felt that it was luckier for me to have been left behind like those others. Because my three friends were ruthlessly killed on the third day of their portering. The victims had their throats cut with a knife by Bo Yat Kha from 2nd column of IB 234. They had fallen sick and were too weak to move their heavy loads and had asked Bo Yat Kha to let them rest for a short while. The result was summary execution; cold-blooded murder. I tried my best to find an opportunity to escape. I pretended that I could tolerate the exhaustion, the burdens on my back, the hunger and sickness, and the beatings by soldiers. During the third week after my arrest and portering, I was accidentally left alone from both the military columns and other porters. I rushed as soon as possible and was rescued by KNLA troops at a place situated between Leikpya Gyi and Mongdwin Gyi village in Thandaung Township, Karen State. I have been haunted by this tragic blow of the loss of my friends and have been constantly horrified by the memory of their brutal murder. I have no idea whether to remain on the border or go back to Burma. I may need a long time to heal both my mental and physical pain.

Interview: 232-HRV: Detention, Livelihood, Slavery, Torture, Execution*[see also interview no. 5]*

Name: Win Zaw
 Age: 24
 Sex: Male
 Ethnicity: Burman
 Religion: Buddhist
 Parents: U Kyi Sein & Daw Khin Yee
 Address: Mae Kaw Kin at the opposite of Pha Lu (former KNU military stronghold which was occupied by SLORC early 1992).
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested by local council at Kyaikto port. I was arrested along with Ko Lu Maw (18) on 2 January. We were locked at the Kyaikto police station. About 60 men were already in the small cell before we were sent there. We were locked in the cell for five days. We were handed over to LIB 207 at mid night on 7 January. We were put in a truck and then we had one night long ride in the truck. After that we were forced to carry 81mm mortar shells. Each person was forced to carry eight shells (one shell is about 4.5 kg). We were not fed enough. Rations for each person was a small tin (about 400g) of watery soup with banana stem and bean. We were handed over again to LIB 205 and LIB 206 on 8 January and heavy fighting broke out on the same day at 11:00 a.m. Seven prisoners, who were collected from Moulmein jail for forced portering, died in action. SLORC troops got more than 40 injuries and we were forced to carry the injured to safer places for the whole night. At 7:15 a.m. on the following day, the columns and the porters moved to another direction. At that time, most porters were forced to carry eight shells of 81 mm mortar and Ko Lu Maw was forced to carry 720 rounds of G4 Machine Gun. We slept over night on the way to Manerplaw. We reached Manerplaw at about 1:30 a.m. and we left there on the following morning. Lu Maw was too weak to move together with the troops. Sgt Toe Toe from LIB 205 tied Ko Lu Maw's mouth with a piece of cloth and stabbed him with bayonet. Toe Toe ordered the prisoners from Moulmein to bury Ko Lu Maw's body. I was severely beaten for trying to protect Ko Lu Maw before he was killed. Toe Toe continued to torture me. I was beaten with wooden stick, the flesh of my hands was sliced with a bayonet. I managed to escape one day later by crossing Moei River. Unfortunately, one of us was re-arrested. Ko Lu Maw was a son of U Chin Han and Daw Thin Kyi, a student of secondary school, from Kalatt Su Quarter, Kyaikto Town.

Interview: 233-HRV: Slavery, Women, Child

Name: Kyaw Sein
 Age: 39
 Sex: Male

Ethnicity: Karen
 Religion: Buddhist
 Parents: U Ngwe Thein & Nang Hti Kalay
 Family: Married with five children
 Occupation: Farmer
 Address: No. 1 Quarter, Chaung Taung village, Kawkareik Township, Karen State
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested by local police and militia in the town on 25 January 1995. Those who hid outside of the town were arrested by the army. Each company commander was assigned to arrest 30 porters. But, the commanders failed to do so. Local council assisted the commanders by ordering each household in town to send the labourer. More and more arrests were made day and night. Other porters and I were put in ten trucks and sent to Taung Kalay, near Pa-an. Some women were seen among the porters. Some porters were as young as 12 years and some were elderly people. We were then sent to Hlaingbwe together with porters from other places. We were put in 17 trucks and IB 27 led us to Shan Ywa Thit in the morning. We were not allowed to drink water on the way. Each porter had to pay a bribe of 200 Ks for a cup of water. We were forced to carry 81 mm, 75 mm, 60 mm artillery and mortar shells. I managed to escape and re-arrested. I gave a ransom of 50 Ks to a soldier who let me go. The commander was Thein Win of LIB 207.

Interview: 234-HRV: Slavery, Livelihood

Name: Saw Win Myint
 Age: 48
 Sex: Male
 Ethnicity: Burmese
 Religion: Islam
 Parents: U Maung Sein & Daw Aye Tin
 Family: Married with one child
 Address: No. 7 Quarter, Tada-Oo, Kawkareik Township, Karen State
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested by the combined forces of local council and army at 4:00 a.m. on 25 January 1995. Every household was rounded up and ransacked. The army took one person from every household whether there was man or woman. I was forced to carry 81 mm mortar shells. I was severely beaten by a soldier from LIB 207 because I could not manage to move in the dark and was trapped in a bamboo bush. I fled away on the spot and the soldiers could not catch me .

Interview: 235-HRV: Slavery, Livelihood

Name: Pho Cho
 Age: 28
 Sex: Male
 Ethnicity: Burmese Muslim
 Religion: Islam
 Parents: U Gyi & Daw Khatonbi
 Family: Married with one child
 Occupation: Trishaw Driver
 Address: No. 3 Chan Aye Quarter, Tada-Oo, Kawkareik Township, Karen State
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested by LIB 209 while I was driving my trishaw near the market in Kawkareik. The soldiers did not allow me to leave my trishaw at someone who would take care of it. Instead, I was forced to abandon my vehicle on the spot. I was fed only three meals in five days before I escaped. I was forced to carry rice ration which weighted about 80 kg.

Interview: 236-HRV: Slavery, Livelihood, Torture

Name: Myo Myint
 Age: 20
 Sex: Male
 Ethnicity: Burman
 Religion: Buddhist
 Parents: U Maung Myint and Daw Khin Thein
 Family: Married with two children
 Occupation: Trishaw Driver
 Address: A. Quarter, Bon Laya St., Hlaingbwe Township, Karen State
 Source: ABSDF

I was arrested by combined forces of local militias and police while I was on my way back to send my trishaw to its owner on 25 January 1995. I was then sent to Shan Ywa Thit. After that I was handed over to LIB 203. I was forced to carry rice ration, but fed only a meal per day. I was beaten with bamboo stick or rifle butt when I could not move because of exhaustion. I managed to escape on 2 February.

Interview: 237-HRV: Slavery, Livelihood, Child

Name: Htun Aung
 Age: 15
 Sex: Male