

Human Rights Education in Myanmar (Burma)

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP)

FOLLOWING the peaceful, student-led uprisings in 1988, many activists were arrested and subjected to long, harsh prison sentences. The Saffron Revolution in 2007, led by Buddhist monks, saw hundreds of thousands of people protesting the regime and a huge increase in the number of political prisoners. From the one-party state under the Burmese Socialist Party Program (BSPP) to the military dictatorship of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and finally to the military-backed government of Thein Sein — opposition groups struggled in a landscape dominated by the regime. Due to this intolerance, journalists, political activists, ethnic nationalists, and human rights defenders risked imprisonment because of their political beliefs and activities. They would not only be handed down harsh sentences, but also treated badly while in detention. Torture continues to be a common occurrence during interrogation to elicit false confessions and individuals can be imprisoned in remote locations, far away from their families, making family visitation difficult.

In 2011, the nominally civilian Thein Sein administration initiated a series of political prisoner releases. One major release of hundreds of political prisoners on 13 January 2012 was considered a watershed in Burma's democratic aspirations. In one fell swoop, a high proportion of prominent activists such as 88 Generation leaders (Min Ko Naing and Ko Ko Gyi), Journalists (Zaw Htet Htwe and Hla Hla Win), Monk leader (U Gambira), and Shan ethnic leader (Khun Htun Oo), were also released. While the releases of political prisoners were celebrated, they were released into an environment that repressed basic civil and political liberties; where the threat of re-arrest was ever present.

Burma continued to be institutionally dominated by the military, brutally repressing the democratic opposition until November 2015 when Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's Party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), won the general elections in a landslide victory, resulting in the first democratically-elected civilian government in half a century. The NLD officially took power in March 2016 with the inauguration of President U Htin Kyaw. Aung

San Suu Kyi was unable to take the official party title of “President” due to stipulations outlined in the military drafted 2008 Constitution.

The new democratic government has presented new opportunities for legislative and policy reform and even some hope for the political prisoners’ situation. On 17-18 April 2016, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Htin Kyaw respectively granted mass amnesty to a total of one hundred ninety-eight political prisoners across the two days. However, despite promises to release all remaining political prisoners, lobbying and campaigning for the release of hundreds of incarcerated individuals continue. There are still arrests, detentions, denial of bail, and harsh prosecutions of those who exercise their right to freedom of expression and for publicly criticizing or challenging the policies and actions of the government, the military, and its officials. People accused of committing these crimes are also frequently charged under a combination of these laws, resulting in even more severe and lengthy sentences. Individuals arrested and charged with these offences are rarely granted bail and are often held in prison for months awaiting trial.

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners

The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) was founded on 23 March 2000, the 11th anniversary of the arrest of Min Ko Naing, a student leader and prominent figure during the 1988 uprising who spent nineteen years in prison for his political activism. From 2000 to the present, AAPP has its headquarters in Mae Sot, Thailand, due to the exile of most AAPP team members. AAPP has successfully adapted to the on-going political transformations within Burma. Since 2012, the Burmese government has released a great number of political prisoners, and most of the former political prisoners involved with AAPP have now been removed from the government’s blacklist, which allowed it to open another office in Rangoon. As such, AAPP saw an opportunity to further develop efficient nation-wide assistance programs to meet the needs of those released from prison.

In 2013, AAPP helped secure the release of a total of three hundred eighty political prisoners.

AAPP was a key member of the Committee for Scrutinizing the Remaining Political Prisoners (CSRPP) of the government since its formation in January 2013 until its disbandment at the beginning of 2015. Despite AAPP’s dedication and central role in the CSRPP, the government chose

to exclude AAPP from the new body, the Prisoners of Conscience Affairs Committee, formed in January 2015. AAPP continues to campaign for the release of all remaining political prisoners. In 2018, despite promises from the NLD to release all remaining political prisoners, AAPP still holds records of sentenced and incarcerated political prisoners, and hundreds of individuals awaiting trial for politically motivated actions.

As long as political prisoners exist inside Burma, the country will not be free. They represent the struggle for democracy, human rights, equality, and freedom for the people of Burma. This makes the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners an integral part of Burma's transition to democracy and the drive for national reconciliation.

Core Activities

As core activities, AAPP

- Provides humanitarian assistance and vocational/educational training to current and former political prisoners and their families,
- Offers mental health counselling services through the Mental Health Assistance Program (MHAP) to current and former political prisoners, their family members, and members of the general population, and training community-based organizations (CBOs) in mental health counselling,
- Promotes and protects human rights by delivering human rights awareness sessions to students in Government State High Schools and Universities as well as training on human rights, human rights documentation, and transitional justice to civil society organizations (CSOs), lawmakers, and the public in Burma to increase the capacity of these stakeholders to protect human, civil, and political rights,
- Monitors and documents political prisoner cases, prison conditions, and violations of human rights,
- Publishes reports related to political prisoner issues based on trends identified through monitoring and documentation as well as translations of international human rights treaties,
- Collaborates with civil society organizations (CSOs), governments, and international organizations on prison reform as well as institu-

tional, legislative, and policy reforms relating to civil and political rights, and

- Advocates for the amendment/repeal of repressive laws and lobby the government to sign and ratify international human rights treaties.

AAPP is widely recognized as a reliable and credible source of information on Burmese political prisoner issues by the United Nations, foreign governments, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and respected media outlets around the world.

Human Rights, Human Rights Documentation, and Transitional Justice Training

AAPP provides training on human rights, human rights documentation, and transitional justice to former political prisoners, members of political parties including the NLD, Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), regional parliaments, activists, and other stakeholders in the human rights arena to protect and promote human rights. AAPP firmly believes that a strong knowledge of human rights is necessary for protecting human rights. The training provides participants with a firm knowledge of human rights and citizenship rights and responsibilities. One major benefit of the training is that it creates an oversight body among civil society members, as they are able to monitor human rights violations in their area. Furthermore, increasing lawmakers' knowledge of human rights facilitates the amendment and review of legislation in line with international human rights standards.

Structure of Training Program

Each training session generally lasts for eleven days, six days on human rights and human rights documentation, and five days on transitional justice. The main aim of the human rights training is raising awareness of human rights issues. At the beginning of the training, participants are asked about their expectations of the training and their understanding of human rights. Next, they are taught about basic human rights, concepts including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the history of human rights. They analyze human rights violations, particularly those perpetrated by the Burmese government, and how to monitor, document, and

prevent them. Group discussions give participants the chance to actively take part and reflect upon their own knowledge and understanding of human rights concepts. Participants also get the opportunity to familiarize themselves with civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in comparison to the UDHR. All contents of the training are taught in relation to the Burmese context, the 2008 Constitution and its National Human Rights Commission Law to make the participants develop ideas on how to improve the human rights situation in Burma.

The transitional justice training helps participants gain an understanding of the theory and concepts behind transitional justice. They learn that transitional justice is not about revenge, but about reparation, truth, justice, and institutional reform. Additionally, they learn about the importance of the documentation process and the need for practical and systematic information gathering. Case studies and lessons learned from transitional justice mechanisms in other contexts are provided to illustrate the application of these theories.

As part of the series of regular trainings on Transitional Justice, AAPP held one long training in October 2017. An eleven-day training (4-14 October 2017) was organized in Bhamaw Township, Kachin State. The training was administered by AAPPs Human Rights Trainer, Ma Zun Pan, and Human Rights Documentation and Transitional Justice Trainer, Ko Kyaw Oo. A total of twenty-eight people including seventeen females and eleven males from Good Hope Foundation, Buga Ning Shaung, and 88 Thway Tit participated in the training. The students were from Burmese, Shan-Kachin, and Kachin backgrounds. This region faces issues with land confiscation and arbitrary detention.

Advanced Training Session

AAPP holds two advanced training sessions per year. The advanced training session serves as a capacity-building measure, aiming to enable the participants to act using the democratic system. In 2017, two advanced training sessions were held in May Myo, Mandalay Division, and Thanbyuzayat Mon State. The participants were given in-depth details of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 2008 Constitution. Participants included former political prisoners, ethnic youth, and repre-

sentatives of civil society organizations. Participants for advanced trainings are identified during the prior training sessions that they attended.

On 9-20 November 2017, a twelve-day advanced training session was held in Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State. The training was administered by AAPP Human Rights Trainer, Ko Saw Than Hlaing, and Human Rights, Human Rights Documentation and Transitional Justice Trainer, Ko Sai Myint Thu. Twenty-two participants including thirteen females and nine males from AAPP, NLD, Human Rights Foundation of Mon Land (HURFOM), Network for Social Development Peace (NSDP), Mon Youth Organization (MYO), Dawei Women Union, Karen Student Union, Youth Network, Kyone Doe Youth Network, Aung Lan Youth Network, Yesagyo Youth Network, A Nyar Myay Peace Network, Lann Pya Kyal Sin, Mar Ga Youth, and Rays of Lights Organizations attended the training sessions.

Expansion of the Training Program

Since AAPP started to provide the trainings in 2014, they have rapidly gained momentum. The Human Rights and Transitional Justice trainings have been requested in different townships and by a range of different participants. Responding to this demand, AAPP expanded the reach of the trainings to different states and divisions and adapted the training programs to suit the needs of different participants.



Training in Mawlamyine township, Mon State.



(Above and below) Advanced training at Asia Light Monastery, Pyin-oo-Iwin Township.

Originally, the intent of these training sessions was to provide former political prisoners with skills and expertise to allow them to reintegrate back into society and become valued and confident members of the community once again. However, the success of AAPP trainings resulted in expansion to new groups of participants. Based initially on word of mouth from former

participants, the news of AAPP trainings spread to ethnic youth, various political party members, civil society organizations, and members of ethnic armed organizations. They approached AAPP to join the training, and AAPP, recognizing the opportunity and importance of including these groups into the trainings, began to include a wider demographic of individuals in the program.

Table 1 details the locations and dates of trainings across 2017. Originally these trainings were only conducted in Mandalay, but AAPP now conducts these trainings over nine states and divisions. AAPP's ability to expand like this was due to the increased demand for trainings coupled with a strong relationship with regional governments and Members of Parliament (MPs) who allowed AAPP to conduct trainings in these areas without fear of consequences.

Table 1. 2017 Human Rights, Human Rights Documentation, and Transitional Justice Trainings

Location	Date
Yenanyoung Township, Magwe Division	January 6-16
Myitkyina Township, Kachin State	January 16-26
Mogoung Township, Kachin State	January 31 – February 9
Budalin Township, Sagaing Division	February 16-27
Palaw Township, Tenasserim Division	March 7-18
Tamu Township, Sagaing Division	March 16-26
Thahton Township, Mon State	March 20-31
Bilin, Mon State	April 1-11
Downtown Kalay, Sagaing Division	April 20-30
Ma Mone Kai, Kachin State	May 3-13
Kyaington, Shan state	May 7-17
Tachilaik, Shan State	May 19-30
Hpa-an, Karen State	June 3-14
Kyaukme, Shan State	June 9-19
Kwakeirik, Karen State	June 16-26
Thandwe, Arakan State	August 13-24
Salin, Magway Division	August 16-26
Yesagyo, Magwe Division	September 6-16
Zayarwaddy, Eastern Bago	September 24-29
Bamaw, Kachin State	October 4-14
Thanbyuzayat Township, Mon State	November 9-20
Taunggyi City, Shan State	December 12-16

Human Rights Lectures

Under the military-backed regime of U Thein Sein, it was impossible to conduct human rights lectures in government schools. Under the new NLD government, the influence of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and AAPP's relationship with many Members of Parliament and lawmakers, AAPP have been able to hold human rights lectures in government-run schools.

The government still does not have any policy in place to teach human rights. Using Thailand as an example to show the disparities between Burma and other ASEAN nations, Thai students are introduced to human rights in grade 7. In Burma, only law students learn about the subject and even then, only in their third year of university. This lack of information extends to teachers as well – it is not just that human rights are not being taught in schools, but that the lack of knowledge about the topic is true throughout the country and across all ages.

AAPP wants to teach students and teachers their own rights, but also their responsibility to abide by the law and protect others' rights. This initiative is an awareness campaign, with the aim of raising awareness to not only teachers and students, but also stakeholders and policymakers. The lectures, focusing on human rights generally (including teaching the UDHR) and child rights, are acting as a direct message to the government on the importance of including human rights in school curriculums nationwide. The lectures were first held in eight state schools in the Yangon Region and three state schools in Bago in 2016. The provision of lectures expanded widely in 2017, from eleven to seventy-two schools, after gaining permission from the region's chief minister and the Ministry of Education.¹ AAPP streams the lectures on social media, and report on them monthly in the newsletter. Coupled with the success of the activities and word of mouth from participating schools, the demand from other regions and states increased. Due to its strong relationships with regional governments and MPs, AAPP was able to accommodate the increased demand, and expand the program.

According to Pyay Township Education Officer, Daw Mar Mar Zin, "The human rights introduction program is starting in the schools [in] our town under an agreement [with] the Government and the Education Ministry in Pyay"²

As reported in *The Irrawaddy* online newspaper, AAPP's two-hour curriculum introduces the UDHR and the Convention on the Rights of the Child

with cartoons, videos, talks, and insights from human rights educators and activists.

Quoting the head of AAPP’s Rangoon Office, Ko Aung Myo Kyaw,³

We aim to acknowledge respect for each other’s human rights and fundamental freedoms for the students.

The news article continued to explain that anywhere from one hundred to seven hundred students joined the training sessions at each school. The program began on 1 August 2017 and concluded on 30 September 2017. AAPP visited the Taung Gyi and Monywa districts to check on the progress of participants and instructors.

Ko Aung Myo Kyaw added,

We found out that even the teachers didn’t clearly know what human rights were. They were also actively interested in program, and they asked for a CD and training [guidance] for further teaching in the classes. Some requested that we talk about responsibilities as well in the topics. We are glad to get this chance as a discussion for promoting human rights.

In 2017, AAPP conducted one hundred fifty-eight lectures across Bago, Rangoon, Irrawaddy, Magwe, Sagaing, and Tenasserim Divisions, and Shan and Chin States reaching approximately 57,000 individuals. See Table 2 for the details of the human rights lectures held.

Table 2. Human Rights Lectures

Month	Location	Number of Lectures	Number of Participants
January	Rangoon Division Bago Division Irrawaddy Division	16	6,000+
February	Magwe Division Mon State	3	2,000+
March	Tenasserim Division Sagaing Division, Mon State Chin State	13	4,000+
April	Shan State	7	700+

May	Bago Division Rangoon Division Mon State	7	400+
June	Bago Division	1	700+
July	N/A	N/A	N/A
August	Bago Division Rangoon Division	35	Approx. 12,748
September	Bago Division	30	14,503+
October	Bago Division	13	4,101+
November	Shan State	26	9,394+
December	Bago Division	7	2,340+

Human Rights Awareness Teaching and Learning Materials

To make these trainings as effective, digestible, and informative as possible, AAPP use visual aids. AAPP created informative UDHR posters which are displayed around the training locations and, in conjunction with Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), UDHR booklets. AAPP provide to participants the local language version of the UDHR translated by HREIB. AAPP looks to expanding its trainings and once accomplished it will begin to produce training materials in ethnic languages to reach more people than before.



Basic Education High School (1), Bago Township.



Basic Education High School (1), Thingangyun Township.



Computer University (Taungoo), Taungoo Township.



What Have We Learned?

It is clear that the training has had an immense impact on participants. Participant feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Many participants expressed the need for more training in their area. Further testament to the impact of the training was an invitation to AAPP from the Chairperson of Irrawaddy Regional Parliament to hold a workshop in the Regional Parliament in Patheingyi, Irrawaddy Division. This was the first opportunity for AAPP to work with the Regional Parliament. Over the three days of training, the participants learned about human rights, the UDHR and other conventions, democracy, the role of government, and how to apply these ideas in the context of Burma.

Aside from providing participants with valuable skills and knowledge about human rights and transitional justice, the training programs provide insight into the different human rights violations affecting the different regions of Burma, provide training and advice to human rights defenders on how they can be documented and their issues adequately addressed.

The sessions are particularly valuable in helping to reform the political environment in Burma. They not only allow for more comprehensive documentation of human rights violations throughout the country, but also allow civil society to better engage in discussions involving transitional justice mechanisms and facilitate their engagement in the national reconciliation process.

The training program and human rights lectures are two of AAPP's key activities. AAPP are aware that training and educating the whole country is a huge goal. While AAPP welcomes any and all to its activities, it targets change makers including the members of the civil society and law/policy-makers for the trainings, and students and the next generation (as they will constitute the future) for the human rights lectures. Both these activities are projects that will not come to an end any time soon. They are much-needed, essential projects that the people of Burma deserve to have access to after sixty years of authoritarian control. AAPP will continue advocating for the unconditional release of political prisoners until there are none left, as while one individual is imprisoned for political reasons, Burma cannot be free. It will continue fighting for human, civil, and political rights until Burma reaches true democracy; and if and when this is achieved, it will continue working towards nationwide human rights education.

Endnotes

¹ Thu Thu Aung, "Human Rights Program Launches in High Schools," *The Irrawaddy*, 24 August 2017 Yangon, www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/human-rights-program-launches-high-schools.html.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.