

Interview 19: BURMA: Hla Win

Mrs. Hla Hla Win is an ex-political prisoner who had been arrested because of her political activities against the military regime. Since her release, she worked for the political prisoners and their families.

What do you think of the policing system of your country?

Burma's policing system is under the military dictatorship system, so all they know is the importance of maintaining their power as much as they can. They do not hesitate to kill people individually or as a group if they think people are trying to go against them. In my opinion, the country's military leaders are very cruel and inhumane because all they know is the importance of maintaining power. In order to maintain that power, they teach their members and the civilians to obey them, but in a very brutal way. So instead of respecting their government, the people are afraid of their government; this is not real respect.

But now they have said they will hold an election to make Burma a democratic country. But how can I believe that they will hold a free and fair election because they don't even know the fundamental rights of the people? They rape people, they kill people, they torture people. I totally disagree with the election, which I do not believe will be free and fair because the election will be under their control and they will do whatever they want during the election process. To change the system is not very easy but I also think that reconciliation between political parties and ethnic leaders who can bring the real democracy to the country.

What do you think of the police's use of torture?

Using torture is a terrible thing. I was tortured by the police when I was arrested for the first time when I went to Martyr's Day. They tortured me because they suspected that I was involved in the Burma student union, or another underground movement. During the investigation I was beaten by the police because they wanted information; they beat me a lot on my polio legs. If the police do not get the answer they want, they treat people like animals. After they tortured me, I was sent to jail for three years with hard labor. When I came out from the prison, I could not work like before. In 1997, I was sent to the detention center because I had been involved in a student's movement in 1996. They tortured me by beating my legs, my face and my head for six days until I fell unconscious. Finally, I had to confess that I participated in the underground movement. Even though they know my history, when I was in prison for the first time, they badly beat me until I almost died to get information that they needed. After 18 days I was released. For me, torture is a terrible thing that people should not do under any circumstances. For me, it is worse than dying. I sometimes forget what I have to do or should do because of the pain in my head.

What is your idea of good relationship between police and citizens?

I don't think citizens and the police have good relationship. As the salary of the police is very low, they try to extort extra money from people. They are not ashamed to ask for money; for them, money and position are their priority. Their seniors keep silent even though they know their juniors are corrupt, because they are also corrupt. They take advantage of poor, ordinary people. I'm not just talking about police officers, but their wives and their daughters also misuse their power, for example, by talking to people very rudely.

If you have problem, would you feel safe to go to police and complain? As I was imprisoned once in 1989, I cannot go to the police if I have a problem. Even if I am right, I am sure I would be imprisoned as a result of my previous history with the police. Before I was exiled, I lived in a house in Yangon, which is close to the Asia Wealth bank. Unfortunately, the pipe from the bank broke, flooded and ruined the house. When I complained to the municipal committee, they said they could not do anything because it was a private problem. It was because I could not bribe them. The more that people pay bribes, the more their problem are prioritized or solved. So it's better that I solve the problem by myself.

Is there a law against domestic violence in your country? If yes, is it well implemented? If no, what are the problems?

I have not heard about a law against domestic violence in Burma. There are women's associations organized by military junta's wives, but if you need help you have to pay, or you have to register as a member which encourages the military system. Otherwise they won't help you with their problems. When I was in prison, I stayed with lepers, with prostitutes and other ordinary people who commit crimes. The prostitute told me that the police used to come and ask for money. When they couldn't give them anything, they were beaten unconscious. There are many serious problems plaguing my country which are irresolvable in a military regime.