

## Interview 4: BURMA: Noveline

Ms. Noveline is a young Burmese woman involved in promoting democracy and human rights in her country. She made the following comments in answer to questions posed to her.

### **What is your opinion of the Burmese policing system?**

When comparing Burma to many other countries, we need to remember that we are comparing democratic systems to a military dictatorship. In a democratic country, the function of the police is to maintain the rule of law; but in Burma, this is not what the function of the police is. Burma is under a military dictatorship and within that, police stations are subordinate to the military. The important people are the military, and the duty of the police is to help and assist the military. The police control the society; they carry out surveillance on the people and try to stop any kind of political activity. They

are also very corrupt. For example, when people buy lottery tickets in my town they have to pay the police because buying lottery tickets is illegal. You can't do anything illegal without bribing the police. The most significant problem is that they do not know the rights of the people. In Burma, people don't have rights; therefore the police do not respect any kinds of rights. If the police arrest people, they do so whenever and however they please.

The military dictatorship system is worse than the problem of corruption. Once the police arrest people, they conclude all charges. This means that sometimes they will charge innocent people for crimes they did not commit. Particularly if the people in question are political dissidents, they can charge them and put them in jail. So the police are constantly helping the military. Under various reasons and excuses, people are put into jail. When you look at the function of the police, it is clearly terrible. But when we talk about the Burmese police, it is important to remember that Burma is a country that

has been under military dictatorship since 1962. The people, including the police, have never been exposed to the idea of democracy. The police will do anything for the military because the military is more powerful. In other countries, the police is controlled by the judiciary but in Burma, our judicial system cannot control the police. The police is more powerful than the judiciary, and there is no protection for the people by judges. This policing system is terrible, as judges protect the military instead of the people and this places an enormous burden on the people. There is no way for people to maintain any kind of security.

Our military system has trained people to obey. If a senior officer gives a wrong command, the junior officers will obey the senior officer without thinking whether the act is right or wrong. Even if the junior officers know that a certain command is wrong, they are afraid of losing their power and position if they do not obey, so they keep silent and do as they are told. Also, since the top seniors are corrupt, the junior officers do not consider corruption to be a wrong action, so they follow the examples demonstrated by the senior officers. Ultimately, I think the policing system in Burma is destroying the

spirit of the people.

### **Why is torture practiced in Burma?**

The police use torture as a means of getting money, extracting information, and punishing political prisoners. This creates fear in the people of criticizing the military government.

There are more than 2000 political prisoners in various prisons, and some are at risk of torture during the initial detention when they are often interrogated for hours. Torture and ill treatment occur in a variety of detention centers, military intelligence headquarters, military outposts and prisons. For example, Dr. Wint Thu was accused of his involvement in praying for the release of political prisoners, and was tortured by the police during the investigation.

As for ethnic minorities, torture and ill treatment of ethnic minorities occur in the context of a pattern of persecution against non-Burmese groups. It also occurs in the context of enforced portering, because ethnic minority groups are often deprived of their economic, social and cultural rights. Military forces mortar villages, burn homes and destroy crops to obliterate livelihoods. Many members of ethnic minorities have left their villages because of forced labour, forced relocation of homes, torture, rape and so on.

As for child soldiers, recently, a 15-year old child was shot dead because he refused to join the army. Two other children refused to join the army, and as they tried to escape, one was shot and the other now suffers from mental health issues.

As for the civilians, Two teenage girls were accused of stealing money and were tortured by the police. During the investigation, the police squeezed their fingers and bent them. Another two men accused of robbery were tortured by the police during the investigation before they were taken to the judge. The wife of one of the men had to pay the police in order for her husband not to be tortured by them.

### **What are your views on the public relations of the police?**

The relationship between the public and the police is very poor. When I was in Myanmar, before I went to Yangon for my university studies, I lived in my hometown in the Ayeyar Waddi Division. Near my town, there were many villages where farmers relied on their crops to make a living. Every year, the police would force them to sell their crops at very low prices. Even though the farmers were very angry, they could not say anything because they feared the actions of the police.

I have been in Hong Kong since mid-February; I think people in Hong Kong are not afraid of asking the question 'why' if something seems to be unreasonable. But in Burma, people are afraid to even ask the police 'why' because the people are so deeply affected, psychologically, by military rule.

### **What do you think about the use of torture?**

I do not agree with the use of torture for any reason. If torture is used when the police deal with suspects, it is highly likely that they might torture innocent people and generate false confessions. Innocent people would then be sent to jail according to these false confessions. I have seen many political prisoners who have had to admit to things they have not done during an interrogation because they were being tortured.

**If you had a problem, would you go to a police station to get help?**

No, because I don't have enough money to bribe the police. Also, if I complain about corruption, I could be sent to jail. For example, Ma Sandar who complained against the situation of corruption among the police was imprisoned for thirteen months in 2008. You can understand more about her case through the AHRC's Urgent Appeals Program.

**Is there a domestic violence law in your country? If yes, what is your opinion of it?**

There is no specific law against domestic violence, and Burmese women have a moderate degree of protection for their physical integrity. But violence against women, such as political imprisonment, forced labor and sexual abuse of minority women by the armed forces is one of the most terrible problems in Burma.