

# Protection Committee for Myanmar Journalists

## Violent threats and assaults on Myanmar news media: report on the violent crackdown against the anti-war protesters in Yangon on 12 May 2016

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### Initial Situation

Anti-war and peace protestors arrived in front of Tarmwe Ocean Center in Yangon around 3:45 p.m. as they heard that there would be a protest calling to stop wars at 5:00 p.m. As soon as we turned into the direction of the Tarmwe flyover, we saw a large number of riot control vehicles, police cars and motorcycles that were banned in Yangon.

It was unusual to find that there were (30 to 50) pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors, and they were very similar to *Swan Ar Shin*<sup>1</sup> who were used in breaking up protests violently with force under the military government and under President U Thein Sein's government. It can be seen from video and photo records that these counter-protestors were staring at the anti-war protestors and the journalists aggressively and prepared themselves to be ready to do anything.

According to the witnesses and the video records, these counter-protestors were shouting and swearing in an aggressive and violent manner at the anti-war protestors even before the protests started, and none of the police officers tried to stop them.

It could be seen that a man in a yellow shirt swore loudly near the police officer, "*there are people dying in Muse. You motherfuckers go protest in Muse. Why the fuck are you protesting here.*" Although the members of the Myanmar Police force who were supposed to serve for the rule of law were near that man, none of the police officers tried to stop him from swearing offensively right in the middle of the public street. It was unusual to learn that although there were officers from multiple divisions of the police force in various forms including uniformed policemen, plainclothes policemen and police intelligence officers in plainclothes, the man in yellow shirt who was swearing was not warned or arrested.



Picture (1) - the man in the yellow shirt who was swearing at the protestors and his two partners)

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's note – *Swan Ar Shin*'s are civilian thugs.

As the time to start the anti-war protest was approaching, journalists, bystanders and other interested people arrived at the Tarmwe junction. It could be seen that inside the Tarmwe Fire Station were a prisoner transport vehicle and a riot control vehicle, and at the other side of the Tarmwe junction and in its vicinity, police cars with the logo of Myanmar Police Force and police cars equipped with loudspeakers were in standby position.



(Picture (2) – Policemen and police cars in standby position)

Although the Ocean Center at the Tarmwe Junction was bustling with people, the way that the policemen and the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors were in a standby position was like a timed bomb that was about to explode. It could be seen that the policemen and the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors were keeping an eye on and a record of the journalists and the peaceful protestors. It was especially obvious from the postures and the manners of the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors that they would interfere with and break up the anti-war protest for any reason.



(Picture (3) – pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors standing alongside the policemen before the violent crackdown)

Among them was a man in a purple shirt who was continuously walking back and forth among the policemen, keenly observing the environment, and talking on the phone frequently as if he was reporting to someone. Beside him was a chubby young man wearing a grey t-shirt and jean shorts. It was found that there were at least 3 – 5 other people who were communicating with them.



(Picture (4) – the man in purple walking back and forth among the policemen)

It can be concluded from the video records and the words of the witnesses that the way that the members of the Myanmar Police Force and the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors prepared to systematically observe in a standby position the peaceful protestors and the journalists showed that it planned in advance to target and break up the peace activists and the journalists.

### **Counter Protest by Pro-Tatmadaw and Pro-War Activists**

Before the anti-war protest started, there was a single protestor holding a cardboard on which the phrase *"When Muse was attacked, was it targeted to the civilian side or the military side? Those of you who are saying stop wars, go ahead and answer"* was written in red. That person was surrounded by ladies, and they all chanted *"You guys go protest in Muse. Don't come here"* and *"Bastards"*, and applauded. Their protest lasted only a while, and the policemen and other people in charge arrived and asked them to disperse. When they started walking in the middle of the road, the police cars and the police force marched with a battle cry, and then the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors dispersed and the police force returned their way. Witnesses claimed that those counter-protestors had arrived in front of Tarmwe Ocean Center since around 3 p.m. and prepared systematically to perform the counter-protest.

### **Civil movement on peace begins**

And then, around 5 p.m. chanting the slogan *"Stop wars immediately"* and holding blue flags signifying peace and cardboard signboards, about 100 people started to march from the car parking lot of the Tarmwe Ocean Center. At that time, the policemen in standby position immediately blocked the protestors from getting onto the main road. The protestors chanting their demands and requesting the police force to make way for them could be heard. It could be seen from the video records that at that time the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors who were standing behind the police force yelled *"the roads are blocked, motherfuckers. Go protest at the border"* *"Do not let the motherfuckers chant. Kill them. Beat them."*

It was also observed that one of the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors who was a short man wearing orange Shan traditional dress and a hat was talking to the police loudly, *"Sirs, are you not attacking them? Should we clear them? Get out of here."*

*Motherfuckers, do you want us to clear all of you?"* However, it could be seen that the policemen and the authorities near that man did not stop him in any way. At the same time, they displayed aggressive behaviors towards the journalists who were trying to gather news.



(Picture (5) – the man in Shan traditional dress among the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors who initially incited the police to break up the protestors violently)

### **Crackdown on the protest**

After negotiations between the police blocking the way and the anti-war protestors, the protestors stopped trying to push through with force, and protested peacefully, sitting down where they were and chanting their slogans. During that time, people yelling behind the police *"Beat them; kill them; clear them; should we take care of it?"* could be heard almost continuously. Then, the protestors negotiated with the head of township administration and the township head also agreed. One of the ladies who led the protest told the participants to disperse peacefully, *"Our march today is blocked. We are concerned that our brothers and sisters who wish for peace and join our protest will get injured, and therefore we are dispersing peacefully while chanting our slogans."*

While the protestors were dispersing, policemen forcefully pushed into the crowd with shields, and affrays occurred. During such affrays, the policemen beat with shields and pushed with force the journalists who were gathering news, according to the journalists who experienced such treatment.



(Picture (6) – Before the police break up the protestors from the civil movement on peace)

During the affray, pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors arrested Ko Myat Kyaw (a member of the Anti-False Buddhist Doctrine Committee) who was one of the participants of the anti-war protest. A witness shared his observation with respect to the arrest, *"The main persons who arrested Ko Myat Kyaw are the man in purple and his partner in grey. They started arresting Ko Myat Kyaw, and punched the head and strangled him while arresting. Only after they dragged him, the police took Ko Myat Kyaw. The police did not start the arrest; it was the pro-Tatmadaw's."* Those who arrested him yelled at journalists, who were trying to gather news on the arrest, to not get close, and aggressively pushed them away.

One of the witnesses stepped in and stopped such illegal attacks and arrests, *"Who are you? Do not punch in plainclothes; do not push or beat the media. What you are doing is illegal. Stop punching and pushing."* The said witness who stepped in shared his experience that the man in purple who arrested Ko Myat Kyaw approached him, and therefore, he had to get away from the place of protest along with his friends. Moreover, they were also chasing and arresting other protestors.



(Picture (7) – Pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war's punching and arresting Ko Myat Kyat, peace protestors, in the presence of policemen)



(Picture (8) – One of those who threatened and swore at the journalists)

While some of the arrested protestors were taken to the prisoner transport vehicle by the police, there were threatening and swearing voices frequently coming from beside the policemen saying *"Arrest the media too; motherfuckers destroying the country."* Similarly,

because of the attacks from the policemen and the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors who were arresting the protestors, some journalists got injured.

In this event, it could be seen that although the police officers witnessed that the journalists who were doing their main job were forcefully pushed around, assaulted and threatened by the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors, they did not try to stop such treatments. It can be concluded from the evidence that such treatments are illegal, interfering with gathering accurate news and intentional and systematic attacks against journalists.

### **Analysis**

In using force by the police to disperse the entire protest and make arrests, it can be seen that the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors were used similar to *Swan Ar Shin* just like the method used under the military rule. It was apparent that the members of the police force supported those counter-protestors when they were arresting the anti-war protestors dispersing peacefully, in the presence of the police. Although the members of the police force are mainly responsible for the security of the civilians, they failed to stop the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war's from assaulting the protestors, and also participated in the violence against the journalists; they are mainly accountable for such treatments.

The NLD-led government must investigate and reveal the linkages between the illegal actions of the members of the police force who are law enforcers supposed to follow the law to ensure the rule of law, and *Swan Ar Shin*-like behaviors of the pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors, and take action against those who are responsible. Even if there is no linkage between those who acted illegally like *Swan Ar Shin* and the authorities, it is urgently necessary to find out those people and take action immediately. If no action is taken, the attacks by those people targeted against journalists and activists may happen again in the future to weaken the freedom of expression and the right to gather news.

### **Recommendations**

- (1) Investigate the illegal assaults against journalists by members of the police force – who are responsible for following and enforcing the law – and take prompt action against them.
- (2) Investigate the *Swan Ar Shin*-like civilians who were pro-Tatmadaw and pro-war counter-protestors, and who assaulted and arrested protestors during the protest, and take prompt action against them.
- (3) Guarantee and protect the journalists' rights to gather news freely.