

EVAP Ep. 2: Myra Dahgaypaw and Wai Wai Nu

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SPEAKERS

Wai Wai Nu, Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Myra Dahgaypaw



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:11

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention, a podcast by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Research Director at the Global Centre. Over the last year, we've had multiple conversations and public events around what it means to prevent and respond to atrocities at a granular level. These conversations have ranged from discussing the relationship between R2P and human rights violations to situating atrocity prevention within the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and to understanding the preventive and restorative aspects of pursuing investigations, justice and accountability. To explore these dynamics further, this podcast will feature one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention. We hope that through these conversations, we can explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. In today's episode, we will be discussing the recent coup in Myanmar and its implications for the risk of further atrocities. The Global Centre has been following the situation in Myanmar and the plight of ethnic and religious minorities in the country since 2008. Despite the transition towards democracy and civilian rule more than a decade ago, the Global Centre remained alarmed by patterns of discrimination and

incitement targeting certain ethnic groups, as well as several bouts of inter communal violence and ongoing fighting between the military and ethnic armed groups in parts of the country. Following the military's launch of so-called clearance operations in Rakhine State in 2017, a UN Fact-Finding Mission concluded that Myanmar had conducted a genocide against the Rohingya and that the military had also committed war crimes and crimes against humanity in Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states. Since then, the Global Centre has continued its advocacy to bring the situation in Myanmar to the attention of the UN Security Council and to support efforts to hold perpetrators accountable at the International Court of Justice. We are recording today's episode on Monday, March 1st, exactly one month after the start of the coup. Yesterday sadly marked the most violent day in the military's crackdown on protesters thus far, with at least 20 people killed. Today I am honored to be joined by two activists from Myanmar, Wai Wai Nu and Myra Dahgaypaw. Myra is a Karen human rights activist from Karen State, Eastern Burma. She was an internally displaced person and a refugee prior to resettling in the US. Myra is currently the Managing Director of the US Campaign for Burma, and she previously worked as a human rights advocate at the UN with the Burma Fund United Nations Office. Wai Wai is a former political prisoner and the Founder and Executive Director of the Women Peace Network in Myanmar. She also co-founded Justice for Women in Yangon, and was recently a fellow at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Thank you both for sharing your time with us today, I know you're busy amidst the ongoing political situation. Since you're both from Myanmar and have been active on issues related to human rights for some time, I wanted to start today's discussion by asking you to share a little about yourselves and your work on ethnic minority groups in Myanmar to date. Wai Wai, would you like to start?

W

Wai Wai Nu 03:29

My name is Wai Wai Nu, and I work for Women's Peace Network. We set up the organization since 2013 and since then, I've been working very intensively around the issue of protections of minority rights, building peace and empowering the community so that we can address the issue of the severe forms of human rights violations and marginalization and religious minorities and bring justice for those who have suffered from the injustice and you know, potentially eventually build peace in Myanmar.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 04:16

Thank you for that Wai Wai. Myra, could you also give us a little introduction into your own background? Working with ethnic minority groups in Myanmar to date?

M

Myra Dahgaypaw 04:27

Sure. Thank you. Thank you for having us. So yes, I am Myra Dahgaypaw from Eastern Burma, Karen State, yes. So I guess for me, I find it as a way of giving back to the community and I also to a certain extent feel responsible to do what I've been doing, because it is important for the people who are left behind who doesn't experience the freedom I have experienced here in the US. So with that I just wanted to talk a little bit about our organization US Campaign for Burma. Currently, we're focusing on ethnic minorities, especially regarding issues that are there that are not really written or talked about in the international news.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 05:20

Myra, could you tell us a little more about what risks minorities faced before the coup including from military suppression?

M

Myra Dahgaypaw 05:28

The Burmese military, also known as Tatmadaw, is increasing their ongoing offensive in the ethnic states that leads to human rights violations, mass atrocities, murder and displacements and all this stuff. And so, just to take you guys today while there was some hope in peace process a few years back there was like totally flawed because the military work to prolong their own power in order to deceive the ethnic armed groups as well as the international community. And so at this point in western Burma, the leftover about 600,000 Rohingya have to live in restricted slums and or in displacement camps inside Rakhine State. And in addition to that, in northern Rakhine State and the southern Chin State, the Burma army also waged a war against the Arakan Army where in the past two years, and that's also displaced over 230,000 Arakan and Chin civilians, and also many more killed. And so despite the protests against the clashes, the military offensive in Kachin State and northern Shan State also doesn't decrease, which is similar to the situation in central Shan State as well as in Karen State. And so giving example, the current civilians in northern Karen State started off their 2021 by fleeing for lives into the jungle. And so by the beginning of February, we learned that there were at least 5300 internally displaced persons in northern Karen State, and they don't have access to humanitarian assistance. There are goods, there are basic needs that provided, it's just that the military, the Burmese military doesn't allow people to... the aid workers to get to the community, the impacted community, and impacted community cannot come and get help from where things are kept. And then meanwhile, in Rakhine, sorry, in Karenni and Mon State, in many other parts of the ethnic states where you don't hear the sound of the guns, but the civilians are displaced because the Burmese military confiscated their lands for mega-development projects. So basically, this is sort of like a quick run through

the situation, what's going on within the ethnic states at this point.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 08:12

Myra, I really appreciate your final point about how the risks are there, even if you're not hearing the guns. I think in atrocity situations, people are often looking for evidence of attacks, physical attacks on populations, evidence of killings, when in fact, there's much more nuance to atrocities. The risks involve a lot of variation, a lot of government policy, systematic actions that go far beyond physical violence and mass violence. Wai Wai, I was wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on specific risks faced over time in Rakhine State.

W Wai Wai Nu 08:57

So when we talk about Rakhine State, we're specifically documenting human rights violations against the Rohingya populations, and we have been doing advocacy to end the attack and violence against Rohingya in Rakhine State, as well as build like mutual build trust and relationships between the Rakhine Rohingya and the rest of the populations... where we had a situation that this particular group has been somehow, has somehow been targeted systematically and the hate and prejudice against the Rohingya population has, throughout this years, has been escalating through many many situations, underlying situations, such as campaigns, hate speech and propaganda against the Rohingya population.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 10:05

And have you seen any increasing risks and Rakhine State, or risks to the Rohingya since the start of the coup last month?

W Wai Wai Nu 10:14

Not really, my feeling is that the military right now trying to legitimize and normalize the coup as much as possible, they are trying everything they can, they're using every tactic available to legitimize and normalize the coup. Then we will see, I think even more escalations of human rights violations in the ethnic communities, areas and ethnic communities. And, but right now, in Rakhine State when it's come to the Rohingya, Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief, the leader of the coup, he announced that on television, Myanmar TV, he said he's going to start repatriations that resume the dialogue discussions with the Bangladesh that they have with NLD government and they will continue repatriations process according to the current framework. So that, it seems like,

you know, for a lot it's kind of confusing, and it can be seen as a positive development perhaps. But it's, in my observations, it is just a trap, or it is just an incentive I think he's given to the international community to ease pressure on him.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 12:02

Thank you for that, Wai Wai. We agree that the current situation challenges the opportunities for a safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation of Rohingya, which is extremely important to keep the process in line with international law. So this current situation raises a number of risks related to that. Myra, from your observations, what are the biggest risks to civilians amidst the ongoing coup? Has anything changed or worsened for particular ethnic groups or minorities since the coup started?

M Myra Dahgaypaw 12:39

There are so many different things, so, but I probably might talk about three to four things. It's that, okay, so now you see the coup is going, happening in the country and then in the preliminary analysis of the harsh crackdown on the unarmed protesters led by the young people, there has been a disproportionate crackdown on young people protesting in the ethnic nationalities' areas and in the conflict-affected areas such as Kachin State. And so we saw that even though the protests in the ethnic areas are smaller, comparing to protests in, say, in Rangoon or other urban areas, the number of arrests of the ethnic protesters is disproportionately high. I wanted to highlight that. And also, we can expect that there will be more aggressive attacks on the civilians, if ethnic armed groups' organizations challenge the military's agenda. You guys might notice in the past week, last week, 10 ethnic armed organizations that are signatories to the nationwide ceasefire agreement also acknowledged the illegitimacy of the military coup and their support for the nationwide civil disobedience movement. So based on the Kachin and Rakhine area, airstrikes and big artillery shells on the villages can be deadly as they are a clear target for them. But also at the same time, the ethnic armed organizations if they don't have clear map, they can hide in jungle. That way, the Burmese military will come and attack them, but who's going to monitor the situation 24/7 like it's happening in the city? And that is exactly why the Burma army is wanting that nobody will know the crimes they are committing because when the fighting happens, the civilians are the one who impacted most. And another thing I'd like to point out is that there will be more divide and conquer tactics that the Burmese army will be using. It is inevitable due to the NCA, the nationwide ceasefire agreement, presence, because here you're going to see some ethnic armed groups will be divided into smaller groups, because some of them don't want to fight back or challenge the Tatmadaw. But some of them will fight back, why? It's because for instance, again, in current state, you have a lot of roads that are very accessible from

the city to the jungle. And so you're going to start seeing the tank roaming and then operation will be taken place in the territory where the roads are good, and the tanks can go around. In that case, I mean think about it, can you imagine the aftermath of all these incidents that will be happening, the conflict will never end. But it will even increase, literally, vertically, as well as horizontally. And as a result, you're going to see the influx of refugees and IDPs. And it is so hard for me to imagine, where are they going to go? How are they going to get essential humanitarian support? I mean, right now, COVID restrictions are already causing difficulties to travel along the border, and to cross into Thailand. So I couldn't even imagine how things will turn out.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 16:30

Since you both mentioned military attempts to legitimize the current government and the need for the international community to continue resisting legitimizing the coup, I think we should transition to discussing the international response to the situation. So over the past month, we've seen a lot of states and UN officials condemn the coup, and in some cases, states have issued sanctions against the military leaders. So I'm wondering, have you noticed a difference in the reactions from the international community after the findings of the UN Fact-Finding Mission, which presented evidence of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2018, versus the current response and reaction of the international community to the coup, or even the response of the international community to other crimes happening in Myanmar? Myra mentioned earlier the fighting going on in Kachin, which I don't even think is on the radar of many people in the international community, either because it hasn't risen to the level of the Security Council or it's just not as front and center as some of these bigger stories.

M Myra Dahgaypaw 17:49

Sure, certainly. I mean, it is very sad to see that the international community is only reactive to what actually is happening but not proactive to help resolve the root cause of the problem. Burma situation is not a one-time issue, it has been rooted very deeply, and therefore it has to be solved. But until now, I mean, the international community is still making verbal condemnations, but no concrete action is taken yet, like we were talking about. I mean, the Rohingya an exodus took place in September 2017, and back then they made a little noise as if they care. But then, what, after some years now, there is no perpetrators were brought to justice or punished, and the killers are walking around free, but the impacted communities, they are the ones who have to live in fear on daily basis. And very few countries consider the Rohingya situation as genocide, while war crimes and crimes against humanity also taken place in in other ethnic areas. And then just a handful of countries support ICJ case and no one talks about ICC anymore. So that clearly says

that international community is just only reacting when things are happening. And then if things are not happening, they are acting as though nothing happens, so yes, we do business with military as usual.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 19:43

That's such an important observation about how it's constantly reactive when it comes to the situation in Myanmar: the international community issues statements in response to things happening, but often isn't there to lay the groundwork when you're out of phase where you should be addressing the root causes of the conflict. Wai Wai, I'll turn to you. Do you have any reflections on this difference we've seen in the response of the international community to evidence of genocide versus the response to the ongoing coup?

W Wai Wai Nu 20:20

Yes, the international community has responded to it, mostly statements and condemnations over the past few weeks. These responses are already too late. And even now, the response is not enough, because this military is emboldened by the impunity that they have been enjoying for many, many years for decades. They, they basically felt they got a free pass in 2010, when we had 2011, when we had political transitions, their past crimes were never addressed, we never had transitional justice processes, and then they continue to implement their agenda and they continue to use ethnic and religious minorities to further political interests and even to the point that they, you know, try to eliminate an entire ethnic group from Myanmar, right. And, and then they continue to commit these gross international crimes and human rights violations. And they started these clearance operations against Rohingyas in 2016. There was no action, instead reward for instance the US lifting sanctions in the middle of these clearance operations, right. And they felt they got more free pass, and then they committed a way bigger, five times bigger crimes, five times bigger so-called clearance operations in 2017, and yet they are not held accountable. So you know, they felt they got another free pass that, you know, they can continue to commit whatever they want. And this is the result that we're seeing, and now the whole, the entire country is paying the price. It's the result of the collective international failure. And it is the result of the immoral leadership inside Myanmar. It is a result of the compromises that political leaders made over the suffering of people, over the suffering of communities and groups like Rohingyas.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 23:10

That is a really important point about the consequences of impunity for human rights

violations over time. Myanmar is a fantastic example, because it has been repeated over more than a decade, this sort of pattern of we're going to prioritize things like democratization over punishing perpetrators of crimes against ethnic minority groups. And obviously, any further impunity for what's going on with the coup now will likely have grave consequences for populations in the future. So you've both touched on this a little bit in your earlier response. But I wanted to give you an opportunity to think a little deeper about what do you think the future holds for Myanmar, and particularly for the fate of minority groups in the current situation with the coup and going forward afterwards?

M

Myra Dahgaypaw 23:59

Sure. I say especially for the ethnic minorities, it is getting very dangerous, because right now, we're talking about every ethnic minorities in the country, they're going to be jammed between many different problems. For instance, now they're going to have to free themselves from the current coup, that's already a big thing. And then you're going to also see the fighting going on between the ethnic armed groups' organizations, and then the Burmese army, which will lead to a lot more refugees and IDPs. And at the same time, for the ethnic groups, even if this coup is resolved, they will still have to work on the political resolution for federal, real federal union. And before then, there could be increase of offensives in the ethnic states. And so, I mean, the very important thing I wanted to point out is that patching up issues here and there with humanitarian assistance, which mostly goes through the government approval channel anyway, there's not going to help with the situation in Burma. And the international community, really, one thing I wanted to point out, and if they are listening, I really want them to listen to this piece, is that they need to empower and support ethnic minority-led community and social development organizations and structures that are operated elsewhere, where they are working directly with the impacted communities and where the refugees are located, but not where the military control, because here is that the cross border aid is critical. And if you go through the Burmese military or the Burmese government, you're going to end up giving away more than half of the funds over there anyway. So why it is not working in empowering the ethnic community leaders who have been working there all this time, they have the infrastructure that is workable, that is why they've been working with and working for the refugees and internally displaced people for all these years. The Burmese government, the Burmese army, never come in and help us, instead they put us into trouble. So that is one thing that I wanted to make sure that the international community is making note of that, because for us to be able to come up to the same level to level up with the Burmese government and the Burmese military, we need to be lifted up, we need to be empowered. Otherwise, we're going to be there at the bottom and we're going to be oppressed and we're going to have to fight and this vicious circle is not going to never end.

W

Wai Wai Nu 27:05

I completely agree with Myra in terms of the power in the ethnic minorities, populations. And a lot of this targeted persecution has actually been able to continue because of this repressive system that weakened, that create vulnerability among the ethnic communities and that create higher level of gap, inequality gap, between the Burma ethnic and the other, the rest of the ethnic minorities. So, the need to address equality, inequality is crucial. The need to address inequality all level is crucial. Especially, we need to be lifted up by through education and through economy. So that is two key area that we should pay attention to. I think, because international responses are slow and soft, the military, the Burmese army has actually waited for a month now, it has been very slow and very soft. Thus, yesterday on the 28th February, they use really severe level of violence attack again against the civilians, against the peaceful protesters, including the use of lethal force, firearms and many many brutal forms of attack against these peaceful protesters. In some cases, they even like come into the, go into the houses of people and torture and arrest and they shot fire against the people houses, towards the people houses, residential areas. And there has been in some incidents of indiscriminate shooting against civilians, unarmed civilians. And it's been really terrifying to see what is going on. I have a feeling that the military because of the soft international response, the military has been increasing the level of violent attack against the civilians that include the situation that I have just described, and also many forms of abuses and violent attack against even targeting the pregnant women and children. So I think we are in a very, very dangerous situation now. How can we trust this brutal Burma military that have committed so many crimes in the past against many ethnic communities and against Rohingya? Right? How can we allow genocide suspects and criminals to run the country again? I think it will be outrageous to see if the world allowed to run this military the country again. I am really, really worried this is this is terrifying, actually.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 31:26

Thank you for that very powerful reflection, Wai Wai. I think that we're all unified in being increasingly concerned about the situation in Myanmar, and the implications of the increasing levels of violence being used against peaceful protesters across the country. And as protests increase, we'll all have our eyes on the country to see what happens and how the military responds. Thank you both for sharing your time with us today. I know you're very busy, and we appreciate you were able to reflect on the current situation with us. The Global Centre and myself wish you, your family and all of your colleagues back in Myanmar safety and security during the ongoing political situation. Thank you for joining us for this episode of Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention. If you'd like more information about the Global Centre's work on R2P, mass atrocity prevention, or populations at risk of mass atrocities, please visit our website at globalr2p.org and connect with us on Twitter

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