

Sisters, Myanmar (formerly Burma where Fr Joachim Rego CP, Superior General, originates from) needs our prayerful support. As often happens when the eyes of the world are on Russia and the Ukraine another war and another part of the world goes unnoticed.

We cannot let Myanmar burn

The world must not allow the brutal junta to act with impunity by hanging two people for supporting democracy

Published: June 06, 2022 03:52 AM GMT ▼



While the world's eyes are rightly focused on Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine, there is a war in Southeast Asia which is too often ignored but just as deadly: the crisis in [Myanmar](#). And it is taking some extremely alarming turns.

On June 3, Myanmar's junta announced that it will execute a former legislator from Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD)

party and a prominent pro-democracy activist in the country's first judicial executions since 1990. Former MP Phyo Zeya Thaw and activist Kyaw Min Yu, better known as Ko Jimmy, "will be hanged according to prison procedures," the regime declared.

This is horrific on several levels.

First, while the military has killed thousands of people, it has not used the death penalty judicially in more than three decades. I have never known of anyone sentenced to death by a court in Myanmar for supporting democracy. People have been given shockingly long prison sentences in conditions which might equate to a death sentence, and people have been slaughtered on the streets as the army has opened fire on protests, or in the ethnic areas, but I have never heard of anyone being hanged. If the regime goes through with this, it marks a new low for this already brutal, barbaric, inhumane and criminal junta. Second, I know Phyo Zeya Thaw and Ko Jimmy. Not intimately, and we have not been in touch for some years, but I have met them both. The thought, on a personal level, that two people with whom I have sat with and talked might be hanged is hauntingly heartbreaking.

And third, the possibility that, because world leaders' attention is spread across so many other challenges, the international community might not respond to this news in time. Or that they might not respond at all, and that the regime might get away with executing two democrats with no consequences, with impunity, and as such be emboldened to execute more.

Pope Francis, who has long shown a close concern for Myanmar stemming from his meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and his visit to the country in 2017, should also appeal for Ko Jimmy and Phyo Zeya Thaw urgently

The spokesman for the secretary-general of the United Nations has said he is "deeply troubled" by the threat of execution of these pro-democracy campaigners and has called for the decision to be reversed. That is welcome, but couldn't the secretary-general himself do more? Instead of his spokesman stating his position in answer to a question, couldn't Antonio Guterres speak out for himself, place calls to world leaders and

leaders in the region, and use the moral authority of his office to appeal for the decision to be reversed? He is in danger of becoming the most ineffective holder of his office in recent times. He needs to act now if he wishes to salvage his record.

And isn't it time for US President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Antony Blinken, along with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, and their counterparts across Europe, in Canada, Australia and around Asia, to step up on Myanmar? Shouldn't they speak out against these executions? They should.

Pope Francis, who has long shown a close concern for Myanmar stemming from his meetings with Aung San Suu Kyi and his visit to the country in 2017, should also appeal for Ko Jimmy and Phyo Zeya Thaw urgently.

The news of the executions follows the shocking news last week that more than one million people are now displaced in Myanmar. In the past 16 months since the coup on Feb. 1 last year, at least 700,000 people have been forced to flee their homes because of the military's offensives, according to the UN, which warns of dire humanitarian conditions as funding slows, the monsoon approaches and fighting intensifies.

At the same time as the [UN report](#) was released, Amnesty International accused the country's military of "systematically committing widespread atrocities" against Karen and Karenni civilians in eastern Myanmar. In a report titled "[Bullets rained from the sky](#)": *War crimes and displacement in eastern Myanmar*, the rights group documented evidence of "collective punishment" in the form of widespread aerial and ground attacks, arbitrary detentions, torture, extrajudicial executions and the systematic looting and burning of villages. Between December 2021 and March 2022 alone, at least 150,000 civilians have been displaced in Karen and Karenni states. Hundreds of civilians have been killed.

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Meanwhile, attacks continue in Chin state in western Myanmar. At the end of May, the Johnson Memorial Baptist Church and 10 civilian houses were

destroyed in a junta attack in the deserted town of Thantlang. According to the Chin Human Rights Organization, it was the 29th arson attack on the town. Nine church buildings have been destroyed so far along with at least 300 houses. Over 10,000 people have fled the town since September last year.

Two days after these two reports, the US State Department published [its annual international religious freedom report](#) in which it detailed continued religious persecution of Christians and Muslims and reiterated its conclusion that the atrocities perpetrated against the Rohingya amount to a genocide. Once again, the US designated Myanmar as a “country of particular concern.”

Two weeks ago, in London, I had lunch with Professor Zaw Wai Soe, the minister of health in Myanmar’s government-in-exile, the National Unity Government (NUG), which is made up of the country’s legitimate representatives, those elected in 2020 along with the major ethnic armed resistance organizations.

An orthopaedic surgeon by profession who served as rector of Yangon’s University of Medicine, he told me how he had provided medical consultation and surgery for Myanmar’s former military dictator Than Shwe and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and coordinated Yangon’s Covid-19 response prior to the coup.

Today, he lives in exile with a charge of treason from the current junta hanging over him.

Until 2017, I traveled to Myanmar frequently. Indeed, I visited the country and its borders more than 50 times, both through the front door with a visa and to the refugees and internally displaced people along the borders with Thailand, India, Bangladesh and China. Despite being deported from the country twice, I found ways to go in and out regularly.

However, for the past five years I have been unable to go. The last time I was in Myanmar was for the pope’s visit in November 2017. Since then I have been denied visas and then was unable to travel due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I have had to watch the tragedy from afar.

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is now charged with treason asks that question, I believe the world needs to have an answer

Meeting Professor Zaw Wai Soe, and a few weeks previously a prominent exiled Shan dissident and artist, was a welcome opportunity to receive a first-hand update on the situation. Yet, understandably, the professor was impatient to receive my help. “You have asked me a lot of questions,” he said with a flicker of frustration and irritation. “I want to know: what are you going to do to help Myanmar?”

That is a profound question. I asked him what he wanted. “Sanctions and humanitarian aid,” he said. Precisely what I have been advocating since the coup. We must cut the military’s lifeline and provide a lifeline to the people.

This article is a direct response to Zaw Wai Soe’s request. It aims to shine a light on a dark, forgotten and shocking crisis. To help awaken the world. And I want to redirect his question to the international community — to President Biden, Boris Johnson, Ursula von der Leyen, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz, Justin Trudeau, Anthony Albanese, Joko Widodo, Fumio Kishida, Yoon Seok-youl, Antonio Guterres and others. To them, I ask: “What are you going to do to help Myanmar?”

When an eminent surgeon who has provided medical care for both Myanmar’s dictator and its democracy leader and is now charged with treason asks that question, I believe the world needs to have an answer. And when two distinguished pro-democracy leaders face execution, the world must have an answer.

There are many fires around the world, and we cannot all individually be expected to fight them all. But collectively we must be able to multi-task. We must not forget Myanmar. We cannot let Myanmar burn.

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books, including three books about Myanmar, especially his latest, "[Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads](#)". His faith journey is told in his book "[From Burma to Rome: A Journey into the Catholic Church](#)" (Gracewing, 2015). The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.