

Statement on Violations of Ethnic Media Freedom during the Myanmar Election

Date: 29 October 2020

With the general election less than two weeks away, we have seen a serious decline in media freedom in Myanmar's ethnic states. Everyone living in the country should have equal access to information, especially in an election period. However the people living in large areas of Rakhine State and Chin State cannot access up-to-date information about the election like other people in Myanmar because the government has effectively shut down the internet there.

Another violation of media freedom has been the closure of independent ethnic news media's websites.

- From 19 March 2020 to 11 May 2020, the Ministry of Transportation and Communication, according to Section 77 of Telecommunication Law, ordered telecommunication operators in Myanmar to shut down 2,147 websites, independent media such as Myanmar Now including independent ethnic media like the Development Media Group, Narinjara News and Karen News.¹

In this election period, the role of independent and free access to information and right to publication of the ethnic media play an important role in order to organize free and fair elections in all ethnic regions.

Another violation of media freedom has been charges against ethnic media editors.

- On 1 May 2019, the special branch of the Myanmar Police Force charged Aung Marm Oo, chief editor of Development Media Group (DMG) which is a member of BNI, under Article 17/2 of Unlawful Association Act.² Khaing Mrat Kyaw, Chief Editor of Rakhine State based Narinjara News, another member of BNI, was also charged under Counter-Terrorism Law on 31 March 2020.

These are significant examples that under the current administration, limitation on media freedom exists not only online but also offline. Since independent ethnic media report on fact-based news for the

¹ <https://www.telenor.com.mm/en/article/blocking-websites-myanmar-updated-9-september-2020>

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-end-harassment-rakhine-media-outlets>

ethnic people living in ethnic states which are in civil war, the mental and physical safety of journalists and news editors is extremely important.

Blocking the websites of ethnic media without official justification, charging and prosecuting journalists and editors of ethnic media are contrary with the 2015 Election Manifesto of the ruling NLD party: "The news media is the eyes and ears of the people. We will ensure that the media has the right to stand independently in accordance with self-regulation of matters relating to ethics and dignity, and the right to gather and disseminate news."³

Hence, the BNI Multimedia Group would like to urge the NLD government to take action on the following points immediately and before the 2020 General Election;

- To immediately and unconditionally reopen functional internet access in all townships in Rakhine State and Chin State where internet is currently in-operable;
- To immediately withdraw the charges against the chief editors of the two BNI member editors;
- Spokespersons of the Government, Tatmataw, and Police Forces must respond to interview requests from all media agencies, including regional ethnic media agencies, without discrimination.

For enquiry;

Nan Pawt Gay (Policy Chair)- 0872099772

Khaing Mrat Kyaw (Policy Committee's Member)- 09250142518

³ https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/NLD_2015_Election_Manifesto-en.pdf